

Rik's Army Career
in its full and awful glory

(June – December 1988)

Rik Roots

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Meet Rik (before he grew the fuck up)

I need to write all this down because age is a fucker and I have a habit of fantasizing my life-to-date into a series of *What-Ifs* and *What-Could-Have-Beens* and now - as I celebrate the 30th anniversary of what I often describe as the greatest, scariest adventure holiday of my life - I'm worried that I'm losing the ability to remember what actually happened to me back in 1988. The real story, if you like.

Earlier this year [August 2018] as I was clearing through some stuff I came across a brown 'On Her Majesty's Service' envelope containing papers. I was about to bin it when I noticed that the hand-written address was to my birth-home in Dymchurch, Kent. So I checked the contents - not much to look through - and found the last remnants of my Army career folded inside.

All of my pay-slips were there, four of them, in duplicate; a cardboard copy of the oath I swore on my attestation day; two copies of my Discharge certificate (one completed by hand); the cover letter for my last pay-cheque, which I had to cash at Dymchurch Post Office; a still-very-neat loop of thick ribbon, bright blue and flattened, to be worn on an epaulette strap; my Army vaccination card, barely started; and my basic training timetable.

It was the timetable that gave me the idea of writing this account. Reading through it, I realised that it gave me a source of truth that had long slipped from my mind. When the

timetable said *"Tuesday 6 December: Drill 30 - Slow March And Halt (0820 - 0900)"* I could locate that memory, quite insignificant in itself and thus largely untouched by my fantasy re-imaginings, and place it as a True Event in my historical timeline.

By building up a number of these little recollections I could begin to fix my larger self-tellings into context. And by remembering the 'true' stuff I could start to unpick my taller tales, unwrap the layers of New Story I've laid over them to uncover the bones - the reality - of what happened. Relive some of the feelings and emotions I experienced at particular points along the journey. Learn to be honest about what happened, and what didn't happen: the actuality of my Army career.

Here is a truth: I was not a brilliant soldier - I was not as good as I now think I was.

But I was, according to Major M in his final interview with me, second in the Troop rankings at the time of my departure, and he was sweet enough to write 'Exemplary' on my Discharge certificate. So I wasn't a bad soldier either.

Another truth: I served for 57 days, 50 of them in basic training at Keogh Barracks on the Surrey-Hampshire border, near Aldershot. Mine was not a long military career.

As I look back on my Army career, I can't help but believe it was an adventure that was destined to happen to me. A second puberty, if you like. I can come up with no other explanation for why I did what I did. And why I abandoned it all so quickly.

... Destiny?

In early 1986 me and my sister Shirley, along with a friend, all unemployed at the time and bored of looking for work, went to visit a psychic in a neat little bungalow along the coast in Greatstone-on-Sea. The woman was nice and pleasant and asked us why we were late for the appointments.

"She should've known why," was Shirley's comment as we all giggled about it down the pub later. "Some fucking psychic she turned out to be! Ten quid wasted on fuck all!"

The woman read tea leaves left in our cups. "Hold the cup in both hands," she told me when my turn finally came, "and swirl the dregs, dear, and ask me the question."

I did as she asked: "What career will I have?"

She took the little cup from my hands and upended it onto a saucer, then spent about a minute staring at the wet mess dumped over bone china.

"I see flags on your shoulders."

"Flags?"

"Yes, dear. Flags."

I had absolutely no idea what she was talking about - a confusion which must have shone in my face because she quickly recovered with some generalities about a healthy and productive lifetime of work, and some unexpected-yet-profitable turns along the way.

I finally learned what the psychic meant by 'flags on your shoulders' on All Saints' Day, 1988. I'm still waiting for the 'unexpected-yet-profitable' stuff to turn up.

Not a natural squaddie

Know this: I never wanted to be a soldier!

People in uniforms scared me. My brothers - who were a lot older than me - scared me and they were all in the Army Cadets. I was happiest with my nose in a book, because you know where you are when someone else is describing their adventures on an Alien Planet.

Now don't get me wrong: I was not one of those sad and lonely kids. I had plenty of friends at school. I have old report cards describing me as 'well liked', even 'popular'. I was good at the school thing: quick to learn, happy to take part in stuff, never in trouble. But I always made sure that my friends stayed in the World of School, where they belonged.

The other half of my life was the World of Home, which was where everyone who was family belonged. Family and friends - they were separate things that should never mix. Once a year there would be a birthday party where I had to invite friends around to my home. I didn't like my friends seeing my home: it was wrong. After my tenth birthday I refused to have any more parties.

My parents were busy people during their younger days and had managed to get themselves four kids, all under the age of five, when brother Alan was born. By the time I turned up, nine years later, my siblings had beaten the last vestiges of the Will-to-Parent out of them. After I started crawling I spend most of my awake time with Bruce the Dog, living and playing in his corner of the dining room.

'Dog' was my native language until I was well over two years old. I still understand dogs better than I do humans.

When not with Bruce, I attached myself to my poor Mother's hip. She says I was too needy; I say she wasn't to be trusted not to run away and thus required my close supervision. She was extremely happy when I started to teach myself how to read (in case she was making up the stories) because she could get back to walking without a limp.

So there were my two Worlds: Home, and School. Which left no space for other things like Cubs, or Scouts, or Cadets.

Mum did try to trick me into going to Sunday School - by slipping the word 'school' into the organisation's name - but I wasn't having it. I stormed out of Sunday School, soon after my fifth birthday, at the culmination of the Incident of the Disappearing Threepenny Bit. After that, nobody had the nerve to suggest I should join any childhood group not officially affiliated with school.

So at school I did (mostly) what I was told, and at home I did (mostly) what I pleased. I grew up happy in a reasonably loving if erratic family, in a long, thin village that had a fantastic seaside beach on one side and wonderful (if flat) countryside on the other. We were poor, compared to a lot of the kids I knew at school, but all my cousins were just as poor too and, being of Marshes stock, I had an awful lot of cousins.

That's what the Romney Marshes breed: sheep; and big families of mildly dysfunctional humans.

The Marshes are also home to two Army Ranges, with big Army camps at Lydd (right at the end of England) and Shorncliffe (to the north of the once-important town of Hythe). The land of my birth is a border area, with England on the other side of Lymington Hill, and France and Belgium just across the busy, narrow Channel. Come the invasion - whether Napoleon or Hitler - we lived on Ground Zero.

So I knew about soldiers from an early age. They were the big men in funny green uniforms and big black boots who would sit in the back of smoky olive lorries as they were trucked between camp and range. They were loud and had very short hair (for the 1970s) and swore a lot. Squaddies caused Trouble and were Bad News!

All my brothers were in the Army Cadets when I was little, which meant the World of Army invading my perfectly reasonable World of Home. Though if they ever swore inside the house they'd soon feel the back of Mum's hand. None of us swore in the house. She didn't hit us often, but when she did we'd get 3 clouts: the first for pissing her off; the second for

failure to stop crying when told. The third was for making her hurt her hand. As mothers go, she could be pretty hardcore at times.

The World of Army also invaded the World of School on a semi-regular basis. After Dymchurch Primary, I went to Southlands School in New Romney. Southlands was the only Comprehensive School in Kent (motto: one Marsh, one People, one School); all the other schools were either Grammar (for clever kids) or Secondary Modern (for the 11+ rejects).

The most obvious invasion would be the big Army display truck which would pull through the school gates and open its sides to teach us kids about the wonderful opportunities and adventures we could all have once we enlisted in this Regiment or that Corps. The recruiters were all good looking men steaming with health and vitality: the boys envied them and girls wanted them. I hated them.

Unlike most other parts of the civilized world, in the United Kingdom you can enlist in the British Army at the age of 16 - though recruitment is itself a fairly slow business so you can apply to join 15 years and seven months after taking your first breath. Hence the presence of Army recruiters inside the school gates.

Some of my friends were less dismissive of the displays than me. The Marshes were fertile soil for the recruiters to tend because while the area can offer a kid an idyllic childhood, the limits of the place quickly become apparent after puberty hits: there's fuck all to do there, and everybody has their noses in everybody else's business. You can't shit in the gutter without Aunt Mabel, whom you haven't spoken to in years, knowing every detail about the damn turd the very next morning.

I hated the recruiters because, deep down, I knew they were an option for me. Dad's side of the family were Army through-and-through; Mum's family were split between Army and Navy. Ancient and grumpy old Grandad Roots had fought in the Great War and won himself a Distinguished Conduct Medal. Grandad Last had been a career soldier between and through wars, though he was pleasant enough when I knew him. Most of my uncles had served, with Dad himself called up for 3 years National Service just after the Second War finished. And so on.

I had other plans. I was going to pass exams and go to a University to get myself a Degree in whatever. Nobody in my extended family had a proper Degree - even Aunt Doff, Mum's my-shit-smells-better-than-yours sister, only managed to land a teaching degree.

I had my 'careers advice' chat a couple of months before my 'O' level exams started. The advisor - a young teacher bloke with jet-black hair who didn't much like me - made the

mistake of starting the interview with the question: "So, which Regiment are you planning to join?"

I laughed in his face. I could afford to. A few months later I had 7 'O' level exam passes to my name: three at A grade, four at B.

The downhill jog to adulthood

Everyone transitions into adulthood in their own, unique way. Moving away from home, first sexual encounter, first job ... whatever. In our newly-minted modern world of social media and #metoo we can all be honest with each other about our various traumas. For instance I never had a #metoo moment, but I did suffer a bit of personal tragedy.

My Mum walked out of the house I was born in, dragging me with her, when I was 15. A few months later I smashed her heart to dust by deserting her to return to the house. My parents divorced when I was 16, and Dad died a year later.

Fucking up my 'A' Level exams (equivalent to SATS exams in the US) in 1983 iced my life-cake perfectly.

I was spudding that summer - harvesting potatoes for 10 hours a day and pulling in around £50 a week, depending on how hard I had laboured. The exam results derailed my plans completely because, without the grades, I couldn't go to University.

A couple of days after getting the results letter I headed inland to the town of Ashford, to the Education Advice Centre. This advisor - nondescript in an ex-teacher sort of way - was a lot more abrupt than the previous one.

"What you need to do, Mr Roots, is get yourself a proper job."

... *The fuck?*

There was one place that might take me, the Advice Man told me. A college called the North East Surrey College of Technology was running a two year Higher National Diploma course in Applied Biology, and were accepting applications from people with grades as dire as mine. Was I interested in being a lab technician?

I walked out of that building gutted. It was a nice morning, with some good August sunshine. I sat on the wall outside the place for half an hour or so, smoking a ciggie and watching a stream of lorries and cars hurtle past on the big road.

On the other side of the traffic I could just about make out an Army Careers Office.

I had another ciggie while considering the possibilities. Could I be a squaddie? By the time the fag was smoked I had made my decision: I walked back into the building, filled out the application form and, a month later, found myself surrounded by a bunch of strange, new people in a strange, new environment.

How can I sum up my time at NESCOL? Put it this way. I have many friends on Facebook: none of them are from my college years.

I did get a qualification - a Certificate rather than a Diploma; the college sent it to me by post. I was never invited back for their graduation ceremony.

... Some memories, I reckon, are best left undredged.

So in 1985 I was back in Dymchurch, looking for work and a purpose in life. I was also still looking to lose my virginity because, like learning to talk, I was a late starter.

It took me 13 months to find work. Unemployment was bad back in the 1980s, when Maggie Thatcher ruled supreme and the England I had been born into was in the process of being shredded forever. The place that finally took me was called Portex, one of the biggest employers in the District at that time.

Portex was in the business of manufacturing medical equipment - basically anything to do with tubes. I got a job in their microbiology lab partly because of my Higher National Certificate, and partly because my brother Alan was working there in the materials lab, but mainly because my boss - Mr V - had read about me in the local paper and liked the fact that, out of all the candidates, mine was the driest handshake.

... Yep - I got the job because my palms didn't sweat.

In the world of microbiology a dry handshake is an indicator that someone may have a good aseptic technique; the less a person sweats when taking samples for testing, and performing the various tests, the less likely that they will accidentally contaminate the sample and cause inaccurate results.

The reason Mr V had seen my name in the local paper was because of the athletics. When I returned from college I developed a painful knee. I went to the doctor who told me I

probably had rheumatoid arthritis and would end up in a wheelchair in 5 years time, but doing some regular exercise might help ease the pain in the meantime.

I didn't have arthritis. It turned out the doctor was diabetic and in the middle of a hypo attack - which I should have realised, given the family history. But I liked the idea of doing some exercise (to relieve the boredom of being unemployed) and, because I had been a fast runner when I was a kid, I decided to join Folkestone Athletic Club.

I joined in October. For the next two-and-a-half years athletics became my life. I attended training religiously on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, and Sunday mornings. I gave up smoking. I gave up drinking. I gave up socialising with old school friends. For a while I even gave up caffeine, which introduced me to the hippy-strange world of herbal teas.

During the winter months we trained in Folkestone, mostly going on runs centred around the County Cricket Ground. Folkestone has many steep hills: I came to know most of them intimately. Sometimes we would train on Folkestone beach - I have fond memories of cinching a weightlifter belt around my waist and spending a couple of hours dragging a big tyre behind me through the freezing February waters of the English Channel, dodging the waves it threw over me.

When spring arrived, our training venue shifted to Shorncliffe Camp - home to five large Army Barracks and, just outside the perimeter fence, an Olympic-sized cinder running track. Here I learned how to run and jump like a proper athlete, how to hurdle, how to throw sticks and balls and stuff. I concentrated on sprints and the long jump and, by the end of the second summer I was winning some competitive races. My Personal Best for the long jump was 6.01m; for the 100m I recorded a PB of 11.9secs. Not Olympian standards, but faster and farther than most.

Training at Shorncliffe also meant I got the chance to see soldiers in their natural environment. Soldiers marching around; soldiers shouting orders and reprimands at each other. But no longer big, scary alien creatures - these were men of my age who chose to wear uniforms and big boots, chose to accept orders and be shouted at. I still thought the whole Army thing was silly nonsense - why would anyone want to risk their lives to dash around and shoot other people in the head? But it was weird to see them enjoying their jobs.

It was worrying to feel attracted to them.

I suppose I have to address the G Thing here. I certainly couldn't deal with it back then.

A lot later in life, after the advent of Facebook and other social media venues, I started to reconnect with long-lost relatives and old school friends. While reminiscing with various people, I was a bit shocked to learn they had all known - for decades! - that I was Gay.

Back in the 1980s I didn't know I was Gay. I was a bit frustrated that my life wasn't following the normal Marshes pattern of: meet girl; get girl pregnant; move in with girl; marry girl soon after the kids hit puberty, etc.

I did have an understanding of what a Gay man was supposed to be like - limp-wristed, talked queer, a bit too keen on the eyeliner ... which, to my way of thinking, meant I didn't qualify.

Nobody in the family, and none of my friends, bothered to correct my understanding. Older cousins of the female variety would tell me not to worry about 'it' - whatever 'it' was - and that 'things' would all work out fine in the end.

... Yeah, right.

There were definite hints which never properly registered with me. Some of them were quite big hints. For instance: my parents.

During their divorce, Dad told the social worker appointed to work the case that Mum was turning me into a poof by teaching me how to knit, and letting me play with dolls. Mum told the SW I was sensitive, special and destined for greater things than a lifetime of hunting, cursing and drunken brawls.

I, too, got interviewed by the SW. I remember the woman only as a condescending middle-class accent, attired in cotton and wool and a necklace of huge wooden beads.

Our 'little chat' dragged on for a while; I was soon bored and wanted it to end - the SW was keeping me from my essential telly viewing time. Then she asked me a trick question: which one of my parents did I love more - my Mum (heavy hinting tone of voice), or my Dad?

"I love them both," I told her.

"I know, dear, but maybe you love your Mum a little bit more than your Dad?"

"No. I love them both equally!"

"But which one of them would you prefer to live with?"

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Either of them will do."

"You - you don't care?" By this point in the interrogation the SW was clutching her heavy beads with some force. "How can you say that?"

"I've got exams next year," I explained to her in my special 'are-you-really-this-stupid' tone. "That's what I need to care about. And the best place for me to study for those exams is here, at home, in the house where I was born."

"But you have to choose!"

"Whoever wins custody of the house can have me!"

... And that, as far as I was concerned, was that.

In the end the Judge solved the problem by making me a Ward of Court, then immediately afterwards turning me into an adult (I had just turned 16 by then) so I could live wherever I damn well pleased. I also got direct access to the Child Benefit money, so I wasn't complaining.

Mum got to live in the house with me and two of my brothers; Dad moved out to live in a caravan next to some horse stables - I visited him every evening while walking the dog. Soon enough things settled and I got back to dealing with the daily realities of school and friends and learning to be a sexually frustrated adolescent and all that shit.

Anyway, back to the narrative. By the time 1988 arrived I was extremely fit, painfully lonely and - this bit is important - utterly bored of my job. There is no glamour to be found from working in a microbiology lab; the whole *CSI: Las Vegas* thing is a pile of bollocks. I collected samples; I tested them; I recorded results; I washed up. One quarter of my work time was taken up by washing bottles. Or preparing growth media. Or autoclaving (steam sterilizing) rubbish - occasionally I would find the remains of steam-exploded wasps in the autoclave which, given my loathing of wasps, was the most fun part of the day.

I decided the time had come for me to meet new people - maybe even land myself a girlfriend.

Mum was attending an evening class at Southlands. I looked through her course brochure and found an Introduction to Spanish course scheduled to start after Easter. I had always wanted to learn Spanish, so I paid some money and signed up. The course ran on Tuesday evenings, which clashed with athletics; I thought I could manage missing one evening of training a week if I did extra training at other times.

Within three weeks of starting the Spanish course, I stopped going to athletics. The spell the sport had held over me for so long was broken, and couldn't be fixed by any amount of

good intentions. A few weeks later I was regularly popping down to the pub for a quick beer in the evening. By mid-summer I was back to smoking 20 cigarettes a day.

... And life went on.

How to join the British Army

Before I get into the meat of my story, some metacontext. When I completed writing the first draft of the account - nothing more than notes and thoughts for my own personal consumption - I went on Facebook and asked my writer friends what sort of styles they preferred when reading memoir.

Karla and Farshad voted for story over diary. Geoff, Bela and Ali were all in favour of a 'tangled' narrative: modernist, quirky, significant with unexpected insights. Carole (who is Family so can be forgiven) contradicted my belief that I lacked all humour. To them I must apologise for this - mundane and rather trite - reminiscence presented (largely) in the form of a set of diary entries.

Dale and Fanny came closest with their suggestions to just go with the flow; let the material choose its own presentation. So I've gone with the timetable presentation, with enough infodump up front to - hopefully - supply a bit of context for the decisions I made. Thanks to everyone for their useful suggestions! Maybe for my next memoir I'll go for something more tangled and gnarly.

Oh, and in case there's any armchair psychologists reading this: my Myers-Briggs is INTJ; and I was born Libra. I'm also a Wood Dragon which, compared to MB and western tradition, sounds much more interesting and fulfilling!

Recruitment

Nowadays you can apply to enlist in the Army online. Back in 1988 you had to visit an Army Careers Information Office. My closest ACIO was in Ashford - it hadn't moved since I first spotted it 5 years earlier.

I visited the place on a whim. It was the middle of June and a nice day and I was particularly annoyed with my colleagues at work so I had thrown a sickie (claimed I was too

sick to work). Once thrown, I had to decide what to do with my suddenly free day. I chose to visit Ashford which, with me not having a driver's licence or car/bike, meant catching a bus to Folkestone and a train to Ashford.

I had been toying - in a very idle, speculative way - with the idea of signing up for the Territorial Army. The TA was, as I understood it then, a sort of part-time army; a chance to play at being a weekend warrior without actually having to become a professional soldier. Wear the big boots, if you like, without marching too far in them. I told myself that it would be some extra pocket money, maybe a bit of fun to replace the athletics.

Because I was only there to seek out information I didn't hesitate to walk through the door when I reached the ACIO. The display windows were full of big images of soldiers doing soldier stuff, some with big smiles on their faces, and that theme continued inside. My plan was to locate some brochures about the TA and step out again before anyone noticed my presence.

Not for the last time, I seriously underestimated the skills and competences of the British Army. I don't know how they train their recruitment staff, but whatever they fed them on in those days was seriously more powerful than Popeye's tinned spinach. I was spotted and targeted the instant I walked through that door.

The recruiter was one of those ruggedly handsome dark-haired (no moustache) types, fit and bronzed, with the most mesmerizing clean blue eyes I have ever had the misfortune to encounter.

"Where's your mates?" he asked in a faint Northern accent.

"Mates?"

"Your friends? Or are you on your own?"

"Oh. I, err ..."

And he had me. Within moments I felt a hand on my back as he gently guided me over towards a table of brochures. I started to explain my possible interest in the TA but by that point we were past the TA display and into deeper territory. He was dressed in olives - no camo patterns in sight - with a colourful belt cinched tight over a shirt around his fit waist. His boots shone sunbeams back into the sky even though we were inside.

He asked me about my job. He asked me about it in a way that made me believe he was genuinely interested in learning about it. Lab technician, huh? He asked me about my interests - did I do any sports? Oh that's a pity that you've stopped doing the athletics - had I been to Crystal Palace (at that time the HQ for British Athletics)? He asked me about my academic career, and looked honestly sorry when I admitted my failings.

It was a good five minutes before he mentioned the Army, by which time I had almost forgotten the reason for my visit to my new friend's office. "Well I like the work I do," I lied, "but it doesn't pay well. I was thinking maybe the TA would get me some extra money, and help me get fit again?"

He asked me how much I earned. I told him. He told me a soldier in basic training earned a thousand pounds a year more than that. He found some charts to prove his point. I was impressed - a 20% increase in wages was a tempting incentive.

"But what about all the shouting?" Ah, yes. Discipline was important, but the Army was a modern, professional force that was looking for people capable of thinking for themselves and quick to find solutions in challenging situations. Was I that sort of person?

The man was damn good at his job. I never felt the hook in my mouth, even as he slowly reeled me in. By the time I left the place I had a brochure for the Royal Army Medical Corps in my hand, and an open invite - "no strings, lad, no commitment" - to come back a week later for a more in-depth presentation about life in the British Army, and the many different sorts of career I could have as a soldier.

Later that night, nursing a warm beer down the pub, I started to shake: what the fuck had happened to me? My old certainties about stupid squaddies flooded back into my head. Life in Dymchurch wasn't that bad!

... Or maybe it was. A week later I was back in Ashford (on a proper day's leave, booked in advance), sat with four other young guys watching a video showing new soldiers pulling on their new boots for the first time.

"So how does the trades thing work? Can I choose what I want to be?"

My new friend drilled his blue eyes deep into mine. "You write your preferences on the application form, and we will match you up the best we can."

"So if I wanted to be an Environmental Health Technician, I'd write that down?" The best part of my job at Portex was the bit where I could escape the lab to go collect samples from the factory floor, for testing. Which sounded pretty similar to environmental health work to me.

"Yeah - though we have enough drain sniffers at the moment. If you want to be an EHT your best bet would be to put down Combat Medical Technician - that's a paramedic on the battlefield - and wait until we run another EHT course in a couple of years time."

The man answered my questions patiently, with a smile that was occasionally as wide as the ones in the posters surrounding us. Yet the more I considered the possibilities, the more my guts clenched. I felt like I was being offered sweets, but I knew it was wrong to accept them from a stranger.

This recruiter wasn't a stranger, though. I felt like he knew me, even though we'd only met once before. "No strings," was his catchphrase. "No commitments."

"So - if I decided to apply - how long would it take?"

"To enlist and start basic training? Oh, it takes a good while. We need to make sure that you're the right candidate for us. The British Army is a professional Force. You'd be joining the best, and we only take the best. And you need to be certain; we need to know you're committed 100% to an Army career - you'll be signing up for 22 years service - so I wouldn't give up your job just yet, lad!"

No strings. I left the office with an application form. It was a long and complicated form, requiring details - such as names, ranks, regiments and service dates of siblings, fathers and grandfathers - that I could only get from the World of Family. When I got home I hid the forms and shiny full-colour booklets deep under my bed. I was in no rush to have that conversation with Mother.

... And life went on.

I got through my working days mainly on muscle memory: turn up, test stuff, wash up stuff, go home. Friends in pubs continued conversations started six months previously about who was fucking who, or fucking over who. Dymchurch geared up for another slow summer season of caravans and day-trippers.

At the start of July I bit the bullet: "Do we still have Dad's Army service details?"

"Why do you want to know that?"

No words. Instead I pulled the RAMC booklet from under my t-shirt and pushed it into the middle of the dining table. I watched Mum's lips go very thin and straight, decided some fresh air would be a Good Idea, like right now!

The booklet was still on the table when I returned a couple of hours later. "Dad's records are probably in the bureau," brother Andy told me as he passed by me to get to the living room. "Grandad's too."

"I'll need yours as well ..."

"You can forget about that. Them bastards don't need to know about me!"

All the details I needed were together, in the same envelope. It made sense: Andy would've supplied the information on his application 16 or 17 years earlier. I filled out the long form while sat at the bureau in the corner of our living room, out of Mum's sight. As suggested, I listed my trade choice as Combat Medical Technician. When everything was done and tidied away life in the house got back to normal, as if nothing completely nuts - like me applying to join the fucking Army - had happened.

It wasn't as if I'd committed to anything. I might have filled out the application form, but I didn't have to take it to Ashford and hand it in. No deadlines. No strings.

... I was on the train to Ashford the next week [date on application form: 5 July] . It was becoming a regular commute. But no strings, eh, mate? The application process would take ages, and I'd probably fail at some point anyway - most applications did. And if I didn't fail? I could say I didn't want to carry on, show less than 100% commitment to a 22 year Army career. Applying to enlist was just something different to do, a bit of idle excitement - nothing more.

The recruiter - a different one, this time - read through the application, asked a few questions. I had to complete some written tests, basic maths and English, general knowledge - I can't remember the details. They didn't take long to do. This man was a lot cooler than blue-eyes, more formal. He told me to wait for a letter they'd be sending me in a few months. I was a lot less relaxed about this adventure when I left the ACIO than I had been when I arrived.

To break the narrative for a second, some context for what follows. The average application time from initial contact, which for the purposes of my calculations I'm dating at 15 June (the day I think I first walked into the ACIO), to starting your basic training was - in 2017 - 267 days. Back in the 1980s it was generally around 10-15 months (300-450 days). I know this because quite a few of my school friends had applied and enlisted.

My recruitment was completed in 138 days. It would have been 82 days (12 weeks!) had the Colonel at Sutton Coldfield had his way.

It took less than a fortnight for the first letter to arrive. Report to the ACIO at such-and-such date [19 July 1988] and time for my Army Medical.

"I wasn't expecting to hear anything until after Christmas," I told my blue-eyed friend who was back in the office, much to my relief. But he wasn't so much my friend now. More curt: "You're having your medicals at Templer Barracks. Jump in the back of the lorry; I'll see you all again in a couple of hours."

'Templer Barracks' turned out to be the Army camp outside Ashford. East Kent is littered with Army camps (because: threat of invasion). The journey was weird: I had seen these olive trucks with big scary soldiers in the back of them on at least a weekly basis for most of my life; now here was little me, glasses askew, watching the damp countryside roll by from the other side of the open arse of the vehicle.

There were two lads in the truck with me; none of us spoke to each other. The vehicle was noisy. Soon enough we passed through some gates and entered what I had always considered to be Forbidden Territory.

The buildings didn't appear to be in good nick. The doctor looked almost as old and decrepit as them. He did his doctory stuff - including the bit where he grabbed hold of my bollocks (with a very firm grip) and ordered me to cough. The rest of my time was spent waiting, stood or sat. The place, and the people in it, were seriously creeping me out.

One of the people waiting alongside us three wannabes was a real squaddie, massively built, in full camo and belts and boots. The poor sod was clearly dying from some mediaeval plague with snot running in rivulets over his unnaturally pale lips. His red eyes bled tears every time he coughed. I made up my mind: this adventure had to stop here.

Except my recruiter wasn't interested in hearing my worries when I got back to the ACIO. He sat me down and started a more in-depth chat with me about my application - something I hadn't expected. We went through the form together, testing the answers, teasing out more details. His blue eyes remained mesmeric and I found myself drawn into the process - I was formally interviewed without even realising it!

The standout thing I remember from the chat was that I had to defend and confirm my Army employment preferences - for some reason the recruiter wasn't satisfied with my choices of Combat Medical Technician (Royal Army Medical Corps) and Staff Clerk (Royal Army Ordnance Corps).

"I'm not keen on joining the Infantry," I told him, completely misunderstanding the point he was trying to make. "I'd rather be saving peoples lives, not taking them."

He didn't push the point, and the chat moved on to other things such as debts and my negligent lack of a criminal record.

"Can you pop in again tomorrow?" he asked as I was leaving. "I want you to meet our Army Careers Officer."

"Okay," I agreed, a little shell-shocked from the long day's experiences and now left wondering what convincing ailment I could perform on the phone to get myself another sickie from work.

The chat with the AC Officer - I don't remember it, or if I do then it's mixed in with stuff from the first interview. There wasn't much difference between the two meetings, and I must have remembered the fibs I had told the recruiter about my college experiences and how much my family loved the idea of me becoming a soldier because the man said nothing outstanding enough to stick in my head.

At the end of the meeting I was told to go back to my life and wait for another letter they'd be sending me, this one for the two-day Final Selection thing, probably in 2-3 months time. Definitely before Christmas.

Final Selection

Just before August arrived another On Her Majesty's Service letter turned up. I opened the envelope without much thought (because: far too soon for 'that' letter) and skimmed through the papers it contained. Then I went upstairs to change my underpants.

Brother Andy was looking at the letter when I came back downstairs.

"Hah!" he said. "That's you, then. So you're starting in a couple of weeks? Sutton Coldfield - that's where I went. As soon as you're selected, they cart you off to basic training!"

The look I gave him was hard - a killer Paddington Bear Stare. Then I went back upstairs to change my underpants. Again.

I threw another sickie from work a couple of days later to report to the ACIO, as instructed. My meeting with my blue-eyed ex-friend was brief and entirely businesslike. "You take this travel warrant on this date -" he waved a piece of paper in my face "- and hand it over at the train station. You'll be given your ticket. Everything you need is listed on this page of your letter: do not forget anything! Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Yes, Sergeant!"

"Yes, Sergeant! Is the ticket a return ticket?"

My meeting was over in five minutes. Which left me most of the rest of the day to go shopping for things mentioned in The List - such as a new shirt and tie that fitted my expanded, athletic body. I added fresh underpants to the list myself - the laundry turnover for my existing underwear was beginning to get suspiciously high.

Day 1

I was in a big hall with what seemed like hundreds of other young men. We all sat on the floor, cross-legged. The last time I had sat like this was in Junior School for morning assembly. There was a big man speaking very loudly in very clipped phrases at the front of the crowd. He had a red sash over his green jumper. I was half-listening to what he was saying - last chance to confess to all crimes and misdemeanours before our applications could be taken forward, etc. I wondered whether he would get us to sing *All Things Bright And Beautiful*, like we used to do in assembly ...

"What the FUCK are you SMIRKING at? You! Yes, YOU, you little SHIT!"

I looked around. I looked at the sashed man who was staring, with simmering rage, straight back at me. I checked my face and wiped the unexpected smirk off it, dropped my chin to my chest and decided: this day would be a good day to die!

My experience of Final Selection was turning into a horror show. From the moment I stepped off the train at Sutton Coldfield (near Birmingham) I stopped being a person and became an object - a carcass - to be processed. Crowds of young men clutching bags and brown envelopes were herded here, there. No, over there you twat! Listen to what I'm fucking telling you! If it had a camo jacket and a clipboard, it knew how to scream loud enough to deafen angels.

I was given a number, told to memorise it. I can't remember it now.

We were organised into groups and arranged in ranks and marched - well, walked in a shambling in-step - to buildings, halls, corridors. We stood still for long periods. When names were shouted out - with number - we had to break rank and run towards the voice calling us, then find our way back to our group, and position ourselves correctly within it.

Apart from being singled out in the big hall, I have hardly any memories of what we all did on Day 1 of Final Selection. I know I didn't speak to any of the lads around me, though they all seemed to be (very quietly) chatting to each other - making introductions, learning names, bonding. I only responded to people wearing uniforms.

Given the lack of concrete images in my head, this is as good a time as any to introduce the P Thing (which is very different to the G Thing) into my narrative.

In 2006 I came across an article about something called prosopagnosia - face blindness - which described my experiences of life so accurately and completely it stole my breath and shivered my skull.

Because I am not bad at remembering people's faces: I am congenitally terrible at it!

I went to the website listed at the bottom of the article, did the online tests and got an email back from the lead researcher - Dr Brad - two days later asking if I was interested in doing further tests. Of course I said yes: I was more than happy to be his guinea pig, especially when the University was paying me £20 an hour for my time.

I still have the MRI scan of my brain, copied onto a DVD. I keep it in a shoebox, just in case people need proof that I have a brain.

The tests demonstrated that I lack the ability to identify other people by their faces, particularly in large crowds. I cannot spot a specific person I've just been introduced to unless they're wearing something very noticeable, or they have a distinctive voice - especially if the crowds are milling about.

So when it came to navigating my way around the Selection Centre, finding my group again, I was fucked before I started. And because the P Thing hadn't been discovered in 1988, my failure was demonstrable proof of my stupidity.

All of my siblings are intelligent people. The three eldest are also severely dyslexic - they struggled to learn reading and writing at school, so automatically got marked out as thick idiots because, back in the 1960s, dyslexia was not a Thing. On Day 1 of Final Selection I discovered what it felt like to be branded a 'retard' through no fault of my own.

Anyways. I finally broke my silence after we were shown to our dormitory rooms, sheets and pillows in our arms, to bunk down for the night. The lad who managed to get words out of me was covered in acne and as happy as a dog rolling in shit to have made it to Final Selection.

"Don't let it bother you," he told me with a smile that came from four years of dealing with much worse in the Cadets. "They scream at you and then you do whatever they say and then it's over and everyone moves on to the next thing!"

I didn't believe him. I fell asleep with brother Andy's words in my head, terrified that I'd never escape from this very real, very scary Hell.

Day 2

My first military morning started at Stupid O'Clock, the shock of which made me more chatty than I had been the day before. Breakfast was a fry up. We served ourselves and, remembering the bollocking we had received the previous evening, stacked our plates and cutlery in the correct places when we had finished.

I had heard a rumour that we were due to have something called an 'inspection' after breakfast, but I didn't understand the concept. Common sense told me the slept-in bedsheets had to go somewhere and, by asking the lads around me what we should do with them, we managed to form a Group Plan to gather them up and go in search of a laundry basket. Which led to shouting and orders to get the fuck back into our rooms and fold the sheets into blocks - did we not see the fucking diagrams taped to the doors? - and to get it all done pretty damn fucking quick because we were to be Stood By Our fucking Beds for Inspection in four fucking minutes so fucking move your fat arses you twats!

The physical tests started at the time when I would normally be getting out of bed. Carrying weights, lifting stuff, going for a run. This was the only time when I was (just about) happy at that place, especially the run. Even though I had stopped athletics training after Easter, I still believed I was super-fit and thus had no fear of exercise. At that time exertion relaxed me, stopped the thoughts spinning in my head and took me to a calmer place.

We ran as a group - wannabe green-eyed-warrior commando types had to start a good distance behind us and were expected to finish with us if they were to pass their selection.

While the various shiny booted people trotting alongside us were encouraging everyone to run their fastest I stayed firmly in the middle of the herd and registered a time that was about 15 seconds inside the limit - more of a warm-up jog than a race.

Later that morning there were computer tests. These were conducted in silence, which was bliss to my ears. One of the tests was guessing where a mortar would fall; another was to match rotated and reversed symbols. There was a third test but I don't remember it.

I was still playing the mortar game while all the other lads finished their sessions and headed off for lunch. A solidly booted man of unknown rank had to come over and press some buttons to get the computer to move to the next test. Which again seemed to go on forever.

I don't remember lunch, except that I was late for it, which generated more shouts along the lines of why the fuck are you not with your group and who the fuck do you think you are to turn up for lunch when you fucking feel like it you twat!

There was other stuff we had to do, but nothing zings in my mind. Whatever it was, it included uniformed killing machines with clipboards observing our activities and making notes. I checked on Google to see what potential recruits do in Final Selection nowadays and found pages that mention memory tasks and team building activities - I expect we did something similar.

The last thing I was subjected to, I do remember: an interview with a Colonel. These interviews were short, but took time because there was a lot of us to process, so I had ages to simmer in silence while waiting for my turn. I spent most of that period trying to work out a good way to tell the Colonel that I was really sorry for wasting his and everyone else's time but I didn't want to enlist and please could I go home now if I promised to be a Good Boy in the future?

The Colonel looked to be on the young side of middle-aged, and didn't seem to have an ounce of fat on him. There were various piles of files on his desk in what turned out to be a surprisingly small room. I remembered to call him Sir, which shows I had managed to learn some military stuff during my intermittent bouts of terror.

I was told to sit in a chair at the short end of the desk, not opposite him, which seemed a bit over-casual as I had been expecting something more formal, to match the shirt and tie I

had been forced to buy for this occasion. He asked me some basic questions, which I answered, and some more questions about stuff I had written in the application form.

He asked me if I was sure I wanted to join the Royal Army Medical Corps. This should have been the point at which I told him I didn't want to join anything that involved big shiny boots, but the way he phrased the question made me forget my planned apology.

"Yes, Sir!" I answered - did he think I was making a mistake applying to the Medics, rather than something more green-eyed warrior like the Parachute Regiment?

There was some stuff about why I wanted to be a Combat Medical Technician; I winged the answers in the hope that they would sound convincing - the Army Careers Information Office recruiter had warned me that people might try to persuade me away from the CMT role but, if I wanted to be an Environmental Health Technician, then I needed to stick to my guns and not budge an inch from the letters 'CMT'. I refused to budge.

Following that, some questions about my experiences over the past two days. I admitted to being scared at times and he agreed that it could certainly seem scary at first but he was sure I would be able to adapt to it quite quickly. Did I have any thoughts about the physical tests?

"I'm not proud of my time for the run, Sir."

"Why not?"

"I've run much faster than that in the past, Sir."

"What was holding you back?"

"I didn't want to show off, Sir. I didn't want to exhaust myself for what might have come next."

Some scribbled notes in the file, a few more small questions. Then the man floored me.

"I'm happy to say, Mr Roots, that you've passed Final Selection!"

... *The FUCK!?*

"You'll start your basic training in three weeks," the Colonel continued. "Your Careers Information Office - is that Ashford in Kent? They'll be in contact with you in the next few days to get the final arrangements in order."

"I can't start in three weeks, Sir!"

"Why not?"

"I have to give a month's notice at work."

"That's not a worry, I'm sure they'll cope if you leave a week early."

"But it's a contract, Sir! I can't break a contract just like that!"

I had no idea what I was saying at this point. My brain was in a state of frozen turmoil at the thought of returning to Shitting Hell in three weeks time, leaving my mouth to operate on automatic, coming up with whatever it could find to stop this happening.

Of course, the words that my mouth didn't find were: I Don't Want To Enlist!

My body, on the other hand, was thrilled by the news, celebrating with one of the most intense adrenaline shocks I've ever had the pleasure to experience. My guts lost the knot that had been holding them tight and my muscles flexed as if ready to leap in joy out of the chair.

I think what was happening was that while my brain had cornered itself into a state of perpetual horror, my bones had been listening to, and absorbing, the message that many full-volume mouths had been telling us over the past two days: we were at the final stage before joining the most efficient, effective and respected military organisation in the world and only the best of us would make it through the selection process successfully.

When the man told me I was one of the chosen, my bones wanted to dance!

The Colonel was not happy with my objections, but I stuck to my guns: a contract was a contract and I was not about to break it. Finally he agreed to delay the start of my basic training so I could have time to give, and serve, proper notice to my current employers. At which point my brain surrendered and joined in the general celebrations shivering through my flesh.

Cadet Lad also passed interview, which meant there was a bunch of us to feed off each other's joy. We stuck together at the station, believing ourselves to be better than everyone else because we were gonna be the Real Fucking Deal. Which goes to prove that group delusions and peer pressures can, and do, have a massive effect on an individual, making them (me) act in a way they (I) would never think of acting if they (I) were alone.

... And that is how I derailed my life. Four years after going on my one-and-only Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament march I managed - without much thought and almost no effort - to enlist in the British Army.

Attestation

My last day at Portex was Friday 21 October. I had resigned the month before, just before my birthday, much to the disbelief of Mrs B and Boss J. They gave me a wrist watch as a leaving present, which was useful as 'watch' was on the Big List of Things I had to take with me, so I

didn't need to buy one. The watch had a plastic strap and a very pale green face with analogue hands, quite plain. I lost that gift a long time ago.

I had timed my resignation so I'd have a week off between leaving the factory and reporting to Keogh Barracks. I remember that last month of work being quite pleasant - it was a warm autumn and I got to help calibrate the huge gas sterilisers through which all the factory's products had to pass. I walked out of the gates on the Friday afternoon and have never been back to the place since (it closed down a few years ago), not even out of curiosity.

Attestation day was the following Monday. The word 'attestation' seems weird to me: very legal; not something you hear on the streets. When I got the letter telling me about the next stage of my Big Misadventure I had to look the word up in the dictionary, to make sure I wasn't mixing it up with another word - like 'abattoir'.

To attest, a person swears an Oath of Allegiance to Queen and Country, promising to do exactly what they're told to do, when they're told to do it. Failure to comply, in the most serious cases, is of course an act of mutiny which in 1988 was still punishable by execution - about the only thing a person in the UK could be hanged for (because: not much piracy to be found in the English Shires).

Once a person has performed the Attestation, they sign the contract - except back then it wasn't a 'contract'. I signed 'indenture papers', which is definitely not a form of slavery. I agreed to hand my labour and my life over to the Army (in return for regular payments of cash) for a period of 22 years, with an opportunity to break my indenturement at no cost to me after 9 years. To get out of the agreement (buy myself out) at any other time would cost me some serious money - up to a year's wages - and my release to freedom would be at a time suitable to my Superior Officers, not me.

Did I understand any of that when I was 24 years old? I definitely read the words (always read a contract before signing it!) but it didn't mean an awful lot to me.

The day was sunny and warm, the late summer stretching to the ends of October. There were three of us at the ACIO that morning: two to attest, one to re-enlist. Before taking the Oath the recruiter, as ever, asked me some questions - only one of which sticks in my mind.

"Are you, or have you ever been, or will you ever be, a homosexual?"

"You what?"

The man offered me a shrug: "I have to ask the question. It's the law. So are you?"

"No, Sir!"

And in my mind, at that moment, I was absolutely not a homosexual. I was a fucking failure with the ladies; I barely knew how to kiss. Sex was, to me, virgin territory waiting to

be explored with a partner, possibly paid if needs be. But the idea that that partner would come with a penis - the concept didn't register in my brain.

I read out the Oath and got rewarded with a ten pound note, alongside my second travel warrant - this one most definitely one-way - to a place called Aldershot. The recruiter shook my hand and wished me well with my new career. I thanked him and walked out of the office by myself, just as I had walked into the place by myself nineteen weeks - one hundred and thirty one days - before, on an equally sunny day in early summer.

... I was scared beyond measure, but what the fuck could I do?

--

I did what I normally do in such circumstances, and tried to pretend this Hell Thing wasn't really happening to me. When I was a kid and had an itch, Mum would tell me: ignore it and it will go away (it works!)

My distraction this time was another new venture. Bar work.

The Neptune Inn sits just off the A259 South Coast Road that connects Folkestone to Brighton. When it reaches the Dymchurch border it nestles itself right next to the Dymchurch Wall, the main defence keeping the English Channel and the Romney Marshes separate. The Inn is a couple of miles out of the village itself, which makes for an interesting walk back home along the Wall - particularly after nine pints of lager.

Fun fact: I was born at home, in our dining room, four feet below sea level. When you walk along the Wall at high tide you can see just how far below sea level the Marshes actually are - like a little bit of Holland expelled from the Continent for being naughty.

A typical evening out for me, before the athletics thing, would involve a pub crawl. There were three pubs in the village: the Ship, near the church, where Aunty Olive used to hold court; the City of London, which was haunted by shaking old Uncle Len; and the Ocean. The crawl would take about half an hour, after which I would decide which pub to settle in for the rest of the evening. Mostly it was the Ocean, which had a (slightly) younger crowd and more space around the benches for the gossip.

(There was also the British Legion Club, perched on the Wall opposite the City, but that was a Pit for Vipers. The most fun I ever had at the Legion was, one freezing Christmas Eve some years later, sucking a bloke's cock just by the main doors a few minutes before the bar closed and kicked everyone out.)

When I returned to the drinking scene in 1988 the village pubs felt - well - jaded. As if I'd done all this before and didn't much want to do it again. Hence my frequent trips out to the Neptune - a pleasant walk along the Wall in the early evening, followed by a far more interesting adventure much later that night as I tried to stumble my way home without breaking my neck from a 20 foot fall into crashing waves or oncoming traffic.

The Manager of the Neptune was a London-wheeler-dealer type, twice a millionaire and twice bankrupted by bad business decisions and clever ex-wives. The Barmaid was a woman from Lydd who, during a fit of boredom and frustration, decided to swap her life with her best friend's life: houses, kids, husbands - the lot. The husbands had no say in the decision and had to adapt to the change in circumstances. It says something about life on the Marshes that this wasn't considered to be much of a scandal.

The third member of the regular crew was The Cook - a large man with a good girth for a waist who was remarkably light on his feet. His persona was tuned to Radio Camp, which made me wary of him at first, though he swore blind he had had plenty of girlfriends in his life and had come very close to marrying a Polish woman. This was daring stuff for the late 1980s, in a world where the Iron Curtain still divided Europe in two and a continental war-to-end-all-wars remained a realistic possibility.

It was The Cook who got me the bar job, persuading The Manager to employ me for a whole week before I set off on my adventure holiday. That week was intense. For a start, I had to learn how to talk to strangers and look as if I actually gave a toss about the pointless incidents in their sad lives. I also had to come to terms with: pulling beers; measuring spirits; changing barrels; cleaning pipes; calculating rounds and taking cash; clearing ashtrays; washing glasses; and overcharging unsuspecting customers who pissed me off for whatever reason, or none.

I enjoyed the work, though the wages - entirely cash-in-hand - were crap. I couldn't possibly know, when I said goodbye to the team after the Sunday lunchtime session, that I would be working with The Cook and The Manager within six months, in a pub in one of the roughest parts of London, serving false-label whisky to men and women who treated a stretch in prison as a relaxing vacation.

For that last afternoon session, I was fretting so much I forgot to overcharge a single punter. I tried to persuade The Barmaid not to ring time, to let the session stretch into that forever where tomorrow never comes. She laughed and dinged the bell: "Do your talking while you're walking! Have you no homes to go to?"

Shirley, my sister, waited for me outside while I tidied the place and collected my week's wages. "We can use that," she said, eying the notes scrunched in my fist as I walked into the sunshine. "Let's go for a meal tonight, just you and me?"

I tried packing that afternoon, but couldn't finish the job. I had no concentration in me to fill my new, black, tube-shaped holdall with the items set out in the Big List of Things. Spread out on my bed, there didn't seem much to take, though checking and rechecking the List confirmed that everything I required was there. Was that the contents of my life now?

I caught the bus to Hythe and met up with Shirley in the town's only Indian restaurant. This was posh dining for me, and the food was properly foreign and tasted nothing like the sick-yellow turkey curry we used to enjoy on the Fifth Day of every Christmas.

Shirley got chatting to an older couple while we were at the bar, waiting to be seated - unlike me, she had never had any problems talking to complete strangers. They ate at a different table to us, but we met up again afterwards for an over-sweet lager that claimed to have been brewed in Bombay.

"So you're joining the Army?" The man was in his late middle age, muscle slowly going to fat, with a shaved head and a small, grey, exquisitely trimmed moustache.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Tomorrow."

"You'll be fine! I've had a fantastic career, travelled the world. Just get yourself through basic and enjoy the ride! What regiment are you joining?"

"Medics." Then, after a heavy pull on my beer: "Royal Army Medical Corps."

"I won't hear a word said against that Corps. Don't let anyone tell you you're not a proper soldier, just because you're carrying a medical kit instead of a weapon!"

"Not a soldier yet. Gotta get through basic training first."

"Here's the thing," the bald man said, drawing himself taller into a lecture stance. "Do as you're told when you're told to do it, and don't ever get noticed! Work with your mates, even if some of them turn out to be tossers. And don't let the bastards get you down! You'll be fine: I can tell the good'uns from the tossers on first looks - dealt with enough recruits in my time - and you ain't got the look of a tosser about you. Don't worry about the basic; just a few hard weeks and you'll be ready for the rest of your life!"

I know it's the P Thing that makes me think this, but that man's head looked identical to the Screaming Skull. Sometimes I wonder: is there a factory out there, hidden in some dank corner of some small Midlands town, whose only work is to assemble and program Regimental Sergeant Majors for the British Army?

Basic training - daily memories

I never intended to write this memoir. When I came across the timetable tucked inside the old brown envelope I thought it might be a useful tool - something to help me do a Memory Exercise. Nothing more.

Until I started on the exercise, I had always considered my events memory to be a bit of a wasteland, much like my memory for faces. Sure I remember stuff, but I tend to remember it in a generalised, formless sort of way. An image of something, or someone saying whatever, pops into my head, then I find myself building stories around the incident - sometimes making myself the Hero, more rarely the Victim. Always the centre around which the event orbits.

I expect it's the same for everybody else in the world. It's not enough for me. As much fun as it can be to spend a couple of hours daydreaming scenarios of What If, there's times when I get annoyed with myself. When what I really want to remember are the facts of the matter, the Real Rik Experience.

I started the exercise more in hope than expectation. My initial memories of my 50 days in basic training were vague and brief - the wide gaps planked over with three decades of fantasy recollection. But then more honest stuff started to appear: I did this thing on that day and I felt those emotions as a result of it. Pebbles of reality turned into an avalanche of recollections that have, over the past few weeks and months, overwhelmed me with some very uncomfortable feelings - raw and angry and shameful, like un-scabbed wounds too itchy to ignore.

What follows is the actual, unadulterated tale of my Army experience - however fabulous and fucked-up the narrative may seem. A story that covers a range of stupidities and achievements, alongside some coincidences and personal discoveries. Small stuff, yes, but important stuff nevertheless - if only to me.

Author Note 1: I've recreated the gist of most of the conversations recorded here - things were said along the lines of what I have indicated, usually with a fuckload more profanity.

A few of the conversations I remember verbatim - I'll be hearing those chats in my skull until the day I draw my last breath.

Author Note 2: names have been shortened or changed, except mine of course - yes, Rik Roots is my real name. The joke I heard every time someone worked out that their mate Rik was the same person as 2-4-?-?-?-?-zero-private-roots-arr-jay got boring pretty damn quickly.

Also: if you're of the Australian persuasion, please don't mention the Wombat Joke. Ha. Fucking. Ha!

Author Note 3: real soldiers (that's people who made it through basic training and actually got to earn money working as qualified service personnel in the British Army for more than a week), and - of course - dedicated and well-researched Walts, will quickly realise that my use of Army terminology and slang is often inaccurate. In my defence, I was in the Army for 7 weeks, 30 years ago, and wasn't paying close attention to linguistic nuances at the time (because: terrified).

Corrections are always welcome!

Initiation

It all starts with the word 'terror'. One of those words that's supposed to be intense but has somehow - maybe through appearing in too many tabloid headlines? - lost its ability to jolt the reader away from idle thoughts and back to the page.

It's not enough for me to state: I was terrified.

I need to show it.

Imagine you've caught a train - let's say it's a train out of Waterloo Station trundling its slow way along the Alton line. You've settled in for the journey and, having finished the morning newspaper, you decide to do some people watching.

There's a man on the other side of your section of the carriage, sat forwards so you can see his face and body. You can tell he's young by the lack of lines around his mouth, but not too young: no acne or blemishes to mar his sallow skin. He has mid-brown hair on top of an oval, elongated skull, cut to a very short flat-top which he's tried to spike with an overdose of

gel. You can't see much of the detail in his face because most of the time he stares directly out of the window to his right.

Every couple of minutes he'll look away, look into the carriage, his head jerking from position to position like a bird's - an owl, maybe, given the size of the oblong, clear, fairly thick glasses that magnify amber-brown eyes from beneath the recess of his large brow ridge.

His clothes seem a couple of years out of fashion: jeans tight around crotch and thighs, a horizontal stripe rugby shirt stretched across his chest. He wears white leather basketball boots bearing a cheap manufacturer's logo. His coat is sporty in its way but has no hood and doesn't look well padded. He has a black holdall-type bag which he grips between his legs, like a soft cloth oil drum.

There's other people to look at in the carriage, but something keeps your attention returning to this one. His hands. Or rather, the way he keeps his hands in constant motion. They flick and beat, taking turns to grasp the top of his bag while the other one touches: a quick finger-stab to push his glasses back up his broad nose; a rub of his wingnut ear, or his flat cheek, or his dimple-free chin; a speedy dip into his pocket - slap, slap. Sometimes it will come to rest on top of his knee, which itself is in slick perpetual motion - up-down-up down-up down-up-down-up - then away again to knuckle his nostrils.

He performs another quick glance around the carriage; looks at you but doesn't notice you staring at him - as if you don't register on his radar. His mouth is small yet ruler-straight, the upper lip thinner than the bottom. And then he jerks his eyes back to the scene beyond the window, the houses and factories of west London now giving way to trees and fields and hills.

He yawns; you can barely see his teeth. His hands are too busy to cover the pale pinks and mustards of his tongue, one bouncing again on his knee while the other settles over his crotch, the overt bulges of his bollocks, like a shield.

When the ticket inspector approaches him from behind he visibly jumps, looks up wide-eyed into the older man's face, takes quite a few seconds to interpret the demand to show his right to travel. Maybe he's foreign? But he does understand, searching pockets for cardboard, before unzipping the top of his bag to pull out a large brown envelope; his knee moves ever faster as he fails to find the ticket within it.

He returns to his garb search and - finally - locates it in the smooth back pocket of his tight, faded blue jeans. As he hands it over, his eyes seem to shine brighter than before; after the inspector returns the card he takes a moment to lift his glasses and wipe his jacket sleeve over his face.

You lose interest in him, look again at the crossword in the newspaper. He's still there in his seat, spine straight, when you reach your destination, his neck rigid with thick bundles of muscles as he forces himself to keep staring out of the window. He's not a tall lad, you realise as you stand and move away from the scene, maybe five foot six? Five seven?

As you step off the train, you find yourself wondering why he looked so quietly agitated, so scared - like a man surrounded by ghosts and monsters and no idea how to escape them.

By the time you reach the station exit, you've moved onto considering more important things such as meetings and lunch options. All that remains of him in your mind is the unusual colour of his eyes, and a stray shiver - a hope that terror isn't contagious: you're starting to worry about that meeting more than you should ...

Mon 31 Oct: Day 1

0820-0900 - OCs talk to troop staff
1100-1640 - Arrival of intake
Remarks: OCs address

The first time I met my Section's Non-Commissioned Officers - as a group - was about five hours after arriving at Keogh Barracks.

"ROOTS! Where's Private Roots!?"

The shout came from somewhere along the corridor that ran the length of the Block. I was still unpacking my holdall, trying to jam the clothes I had brought with me into the thin, tall, white 'personal locker' next to my bed.

"ROOTS! We need to see Roots!"

"Oh, shit!"

"Is that you?" asked Carl, who shared the room with me alongside two blokes who had both introduced themselves as 'Dave'.

I didn't need to say anything - the way the blood drained out of my face was enough to admit the fact.

"Well don't just stand there," said the Dave with the moustache. "Move your fucking arse!"

I moved my arse, dropping clothes on the floor and stepping into the corridor just as a group of men stopped a couple of yards short of the door.

"You Roots!?"

"Yes?"

"Yes, Corporal!"

"Yes, Corporal!"

There they stood: three men dressed in Army jumpers and trousers and berets and boots: green, topped and tailed in black. The only other colour on them was in the belts around their waists - red, blue, yellow - and the white chevron stripes across their biceps. All were taller than me, which became very apparent as they gathered around my flesh.

"Roots, huh?" continued the shouty one, now six inches from my face. "They want to make you an Officer! What do you think about that?"

"Corporal?"

"An Officer! Do you think you're Officer material, Pte Roots?"

... *The fuck?*

While my brain froze, my mouth decided to play safe: "No, Corporal!"

"Hah! Didn't think so! And learn to FUCKING SHOUT when you answer me!"

"YES, CORPORAL!"

... And then they were gone from in front of my face, stomping in-step along the corridor like they owned it. Which they did.

I closed my eyes, took a moment to try and bring my breathing back under control. When I opened them again, the nightmare got worse: heads staring at me - heads on bodies in the corridor, heads poked around doors, some quizzical, some with open mouths.

I remembered the last piece of advice the Bald Man had offered me so, so long ago the previous evening: keep your head down; don't get noticed!

"Well, that's me fucked then!" I announced to the wall opposite, before stepping back into my room and the mess that awaited me there.

The journey that morning from home to Sandling Junction to Charing Cross to Waterloo to Aldershot - I don't want to remember that journey. I do remember staring at my faint reflection in the window, too terrified to look at anyone else in the carriage. I remember the taste of blood in my mouth after my teeth bit into my cheek when the words 'Aldershot' pulled into my line of sight.

I was expecting to see soldiers outside the station - I had a vague idea that somebody would be collecting me and herding me onto a bus or truck to complete the journey to the Barracks. But all I saw outside the station was Aldershot - not much of a town.

I checked my new watch: half past eleven. Was I too early?

"You heading to Keogh too?"

The question made me jump. Behind me stood three blokes dressed in coats and jeans, each with a big green bag at their feet or strapped to their back.

"Yeah," I nodded. They all had short, stylish haircuts and a bulk about their chests that made me think they might be soldiers.

"We're gonna get a taxi. You wanna join?"

"Okay!" It was a plan that seemed like it could work. The men headed off towards the taxi rank and I picked up my not-green bag and followed. Transport acquired, bags thrown into the car boot, I squeezed into the back seat and let them take control.

The men knew each other; they were part-time soldiers - Territorial Army - reporting for the start of their two-week annual training commitment. I listened to their chat as the car started its winding journey into the deep, bronze-leaved woods. This would have been me, I realised, had I stuck with my original intention when I first walked into the Army Careers Information Office.

"So where are you based, mate?"

"Here," I admitted. "I'll be based at Keogh."

"Is this your first annual, then?"

"Um, no. I'm not in the TA. I'm starting my basic training today."

"Nah, mate. That can't be right. The Regulars don't do their basic training at Keogh."

... *The fuck?*

"I got orders. They definitely say Keogh."

"They must be wrong, mate. Not the first time they've got the paperwork wrong!"

The biggest fear I had about the day, before it started, was being late. Whatever it was that was going to happen to me - and I had some interesting nightmares in the weeks running up to this day - I was certain of just one thing: Do Not Be Late!

There was no NCO waiting at the station for me because I was one of the first to arrive. Other new recruits got the classic meet-and-greet treatment at the station. I lucked out by meeting some blokes who Had A Fucking Clue and getting to the main gates of Keogh without NCO (or parental) assistance.

I signed in at the Guardroom situated a little way past the solid metal main gates and made my way to a large, modern-looking building somewhere in the distance. Once there I

was told to wait, then told to fill out some forms, then wait some more. Then I got given some papers - including a staple-bound timetable which detailed my life, down to the minute, for the next eighteen weeks. At some point somebody told me my Army Number: an eight digit code that I needed to write down and then memorize as soon as possible, definitely before the end of the day.

They changed my name. I was no longer 'Rik Roots'; from that moment forward I was to be known as '2-4-?-?-?-?-zero-private-roots-arr-jay!'

I waited some more, alongside a couple of lads who had arrived earlier than me. Others turned up in dribs and drabs. When there was enough of us to form a group a young soldier with red ribbons slipped over the epaulettes of his camouflage jacket led us outside and walked us to our Accommodation Block - a barely attached part of a forbidding redbrick building, with three floors and a jaded look around its frames.

I got directed to my room - up some stairs and along a long corridor - by an NCO with a clipboard. I was the first one in the room so I dumped my bag on the metal springs of the bed behind the door and trotted back out.

Again as a group we were walked over to the Quarter Masters Block. If I was supposed to be learning the relative positions of these places, then it wasn't sinking in. Whenever in doubt, I followed someone who looked like they Had A Fucking Clue.

One man who definitely Had A Fucking Clue was Edinburgh Guy. Tall, hale and handsome in that classic Celtic black-hair-blue-eyes way, he was also roughly my age which made talking to him - using my freshly learned barman skills - easier than talking to the others in the group, who all still had their acne.

We entered the QM block last and managed to exchange names before we were processed. No uniform and boots: instead a maroon tracksuit and a pair of green-on-cream Reebok trainers (posh gear in my view!) alongside pillows, sheets, blankets, a small mat and a single-bed-size mattress wrapped in plastic.

Back outside again, we could see the others attempting to individually carry their new kit back to our billet. "They look like a shower of shit," was EG's conclusion. "Here, stick yer mattress on mine and pile the gear on top. I'll take one end and you the other and we'll be back in nae time!"

If that was a test, I passed it thanks to EG. Later that evening I learned his story (second hand - he wasn't in my Section): he had been toying with the idea of enlisting for a while, but got a job instead. One day he saw a bunch of soldiers running up a hill, followed by a man driving a green ambulance: "I want to be that guy!" he decided, "the one driving," and joined

an RAMC TA unit a few weeks later. He enjoyed his hobby more than his work - he even got himself a tattoo of his RAMC cap badge on his arm - so he decided to jack in his job and enlist as a Regular.

Everybody had a story like that, a story about how they wanted to become soldiers, and the challenges they had had to overcome over the past year or so to achieve their ambition. Except me, I realised, when it was my turn to share my story with the Section that evening. I had no story like that. I had never dreamed of becoming a soldier; my journey towards enlistment had been both swift and stupidly effortless.

"Oh, I was working as a lab technician but the pay was shit," I told the group. "So I signed up ..." and that was all I could manage.

Our Troop - not Squad - was called Home Troop, after Sir Anthony Dickson Home VC KCB. The Troop ahead of us was Jee Troop (Joseph Jee VC CB); the one that would follow was to be called Farmer Troop (Joseph John Farmer VC). I learned on that first night that the Royal Army Medical Corps - my new family - had developed a taste for collecting Victoria Crosses soon after the award was created, and had more in its Military Museum than any other Corps or Regiment in the country.

Home Troop was made up of around 60ish new recruits. We were divided into three Sections of 20 or so. Two Sections were housed on the ground floor of the Accommodation Block, while my Section - 3 Section - was on the first floor. Each Section had 5 rooms (I could be wrong here), and each room contained 4 men.

Sharing a room was a new experience for many of the lads. For me? Not a problem - the only time I had had my own room was when I went to college and, truth be told, I never really got used to sleeping in a room by myself. 24 hours earlier I had been sharing a room with my brother Alan who, being diabetic, would frequently wake me up in the middle of the night, raging incoherently in the midst of a hypo attack. Mum had taught me early on in my life what to do when that happened (action: go wake her up); by the time I had put on enough weight and muscle to fight him back into bed and kneel on his arms while forcing sugar water down his throat (age:14) the responsibility for his nocturnal wellbeing was entirely mine. One of the few benefits that I could see from these new sleeping arrangements was that I might finally get some uninterrupted sleep.

The room itself was sparse: linoleum tiles on the floor; white painted walls; a long fluorescent light attached to the ceiling. Four metal beds, each with a thin, white 'personal locker' and a much wider, wooden 'show locker' to one side - both to be padlocked at all times when away from the room. We had a big sash window which looked out onto another Accommodation Block, with an old-fashioned radiator beneath it and a table and chair ahead of it. The room had a door which opened inwards and was left open most of the time; my bed was behind the door, thus out of view of anyone passing by in the corridor. The light switch was on the wall next to the door and thus my responsibility.

Carl had the bed opposite me, which meant the poor sod got almost no privacy at all. He also got the job of having to shout stuff whenever an Officer or NCO entered the room. The Two Daves had beds closer to the window. Their lockers were positioned the mirror of ours so during Inspection we would be stood on our mats beside our beds and ahead of our lockers, forming the corners to a neat square in the middle of the room.

Every room was the same, and by six O'Clock - sorry, 1800 - most of us were pretty much the same too. Civilian clothes were strictly discouraged while in Barracks. When not out and about doing stuff in the classroom or PT Block or Parade Square or surrounding woods we had to wear our maroon tracksuits and trainers. The tracksuits, while having the Corps badge embroidered over the left breast, were not 'official' uniform, which meant we had to pay for them out of our (currently unearned) wages. We also had to pay for our accommodation and food, which I only discovered later when I received my first monthly wage slip.

Food was served in the Mess, which formed the central, connecting section of the great, four-winged building. Our Block was attached to it by a short corridor on the ground floor. Dinner was served between (I think) 1700 and 1930. There were stairwells at each end of the long corridor but, because Jee Troop had the half of the first floor closest to the Mess, we had to use the other one - the one with the NCOs room and payphones, and the Block's only smoking area tucked between the outside door and the bottom of the stairwell.

Because most of us were now wearing identical tracksuits, and many of us had had haircuts, I had no clue who anyone was anymore (because: the P Thing). I followed my roommates to the Mess and promptly lost them; sat down with my first meal of the day among a group of men who turned out to be Jee Troop veterans. They watched me like a cat watches an inquisitive mouse as I started to poke through the food on my plate, looking for something that might be edible.

Up until that moment I had always been a picky eater. Mum had tried her best to get me to eat proper food when I was very young but that was a battle she was never going to win: at age three, if it wasn't sausages and mashed potatoes covered with gravy on my plate, then I wasn't touching it. I did get better over the years, but nothing prepared me for the food on this plate.

It looked like it might be some sort of chicken appendage, drowned in a puddle of snot, with barely mashed tuber and a boiled vegetable of grey complexion and unknown origin piled to the side. There were bones and tubes sticking out of the meat; there was a broken stump of a feather stalk embedded in the burned skin.

"Don't fucking pick at it," someone told me.

"Close your eyes and swallow it: you don't have fucking time to worry about how it looks!" added another.

"Or tastes!" said a third.

"Eat what they stick on yer plate and just hope the cunts ain't shat in it!" concluded the first, to general nods of agreements.

I closed my eyes and shoved the crap dripping from my fork into my mouth, chewed twice, and swallowed. When it didn't return immediately to the plate I risked a second mouthful, and a third. The quicker I ate it, I discovered, the less disgusting it tasted. A few minutes later the plate was cleared save for some bones and gristle.

In the midst of Horror, I was beginning to learn.

Room allocations had been made on a strict alphabetical basis, which is why I ended up in a room with Carl and the Two Daves.

Carl was a Gift from the Heavens. One of the few blokes in the Troop shorter than me, he had been on a mission to become a soldier since the moment he got given his first plastic tommy-gun. Cornish by birth and breeding, his accent had a rural familiarity to my ears which other voices lacked; most of the Troop were born north of Watford. In other ways he was the complete opposite to me: chatty, open, easy-going, interested in other people. He also had good taste in music - Ska - and a passion for All Things Moped. He had no choice but to become my best mate!

Carl had arrived in Keogh with long hair but by the evening he had a #2 all-over buzz cut, just like me. Cpl W - our Section Corporal, the same man who had demanded to know if I

had it in me to become an Officer - had relieved me of my flat-top, even though my hair was already plenty short enough to meet Army regulations:

"You will remember this moment for the rest of your life," he told me as he scraped the clippers over my skull, "and you will remember it was me what did it!"

... Which is true: Cpl W must've been a fucking psychic!

He was also, despite the shouting, a good bloke. It was his job to nanny us all through our first hours, days and weeks as we journeyed from disparate civilians to clued-up soldiers and - at least in my case - he performed his task well. He was a year younger than me but had been in the Army since he was a boy, so definitely qualified as someone who Had A Fucking Clue. He lived in married quarters with a wife and baby daughter - we would salute them both when marching past her pushing the pram. He was quick to smile, happy to listen, effective at explaining stuff.

"When you wipe your arses," he told us as we sat at his feet that first evening, "you only need to use one sheet."

He ripped a single sheet of toilet paper from the roll and held it up.

"Wipe with two fingers, then fold it in half - and this is the important bit! - with the shit on the inside! Then wipe again. If you've had a particularly good shit, you may need to fold and wipe a third time. Why is this important? Because when you're on the battlefield you ain't gonna be carrying ten rolls of bog paper round with you and, believe me, you're still gonna need to shit. You have to conserve your supplies - unless you're one of those perverts who enjoys wiping their arse with their bare hands!"

One of the Daves - the one with the moustache - knew this information already. Another Gift from God, Dave the Para was an ex-Para (former member of the Parachute Regiment, the UK's premier elite Infantry commando thing) who had broken his leg falling off a table, which prevented him from jumping out of planes. He had quit the Army after a year of not-jumping-out-of-planes, but then got bored in Civvy Street and re-enlisted as a medic. The recruiting officer had promised him that he'd be able to skip the first 8 weeks of training so he was super-pissed-off when he arrived at Keogh to learn he was in Home Troop, not Jee Troop, and thus had to endure eight weeks of basic training before learning how to skewer bastards with needles.

I didn't give a toss about his hard luck story. All I knew was that I had ended up sharing a room with an experienced professional soldier who had no interest in letting his roommates screw up his life over the next few weeks.

Straight after dinner Dave had the four of us naked in the showers, deliberately laughing at each other's cocks: "We're gonna be in each other's faces for months - might as well stop being embarrassed in front of each other now!" was his explanation, before landing a zing from the tip of his rolled-up towel on my arse. Damn fine shot, that man!

Dave had come prepared for life in the Barracks. He had a radio alarm clock to wake us all in the mornings, and a small bible to display on any handy shelf near his bed. "The bastards are less likely to give you shit if they think you're a Christian," he explained. He also had a tape measure - something that had not been included in the Big List of Things I had been fretting about the day before, yet a thing that was to become vital to our lives over the next few weeks.

Our main task for the evening, beyond memorizing our fucking numbers ("2-4-?-?-?-?-zero-private-roots-arr-jay!"), was learning how to construct the perfect bed block - an origami of blankets and sheets folded to create a solid brick of specific (to the millimetre) dimensions. This was made more fun by the fact that the sheets were frayed at the edges and the blankets were cut slightly off-true and a bit jagged. Then we had to take them apart so we could use the fuckers to sleep in. When I saw Dave the Para hide one of the folded blankets under his bed I copied him; I could use it as a template for measuring up the rest of the block the next morning when we'd have to rebuild them, thus no need to beg for the measuring tape.

... And then the day was done. We were expected to be in our beds by 2200, with lights out (my job, because the light switch was my responsibility) at 2230. Cpl W came round to make sure we were all safely tucked in. He really was a sweet guy!

Hallowe'en 1988 was (and remains) the longest day of my life. I was in a situation I had never hoped or planned to be in, surrounded by strange and powerful men who scared the living shit out of me.

On the positive side, at least I now knew how to wipe my own arse using just a single sheet of toilet paper.

Tues 1 Nov: Day 2

0745-0815 - Unit tour
0820-0900 - Fire lecture

0905-0945 - Discipline do's and don't's
0950-1225 - Kit issue / PULHEEMS
1345-1425 - Schick test / blood grouping
1430-1640 - Kit issue / PULHEEMS
Remarks: Fire and bomb alert

Dave the Para's radio alarm clock woke us at 0515 - quarter of an hour before an NCO banged on our door to get us out of our beds. The NCO gave us Orders: shower; shave; dress; eat; make bed blocks. All to be completed by zero-seven-thirty when he'd be back to check on us.

Breakfast was always a combination of cereal, full English fry up, toast, and tea self-served from a huge tea urn which - according to rumour - contained more bromide than water. This time I made certain not to lose sight of my roommates during the melee.

As promised the NCO - LCpl O - popped his head around the door to let us know our bed blocks were shite. Then we all rushed downstairs to line up in three rows of 20 for our first outside activity of the day. Jee Troop were up and about too, dressed in proper soldier kit and neatly aligned in formation. "Don't you even look at them," screamed the Troop Sergeant. "You ain't earned the fucking right to stand on the same tarmac as those men!"

For the Unit Tour, all officers and NCOs associated with Home Troop were (I think) in attendance. Major M took the opportunity to introduce them to us, expecting us to remember their names and ranks instantly. To me, they all seemed pretty interchangeable at that distance (because: the P Thing). Then we set off on our tour of Keogh Barracks.

The exercise was undertaken at what the British Army considers to be 'walking speed' - in other words: bloody fast! As we moved off NCOs started shouting LEFT RIGHT LEFT etc, in the vain hope that we'd pick up on the idea. No chance: we were crap at marching in-step. And because none of us newbies were used to walking so fast we would have to break into a jog every now and then to bring us back up to the Major, who was merrily pointing out this building and that monument without giving a toss whether his new Troop was still within hearing distance of him.

The only thing I learned during the tour was that with a bit of effort I could achieve an effective walking speed. By the end of the half hour I was out of breath, but I wasn't panting as badly as most of my new mates.

The tour ended at our classroom. Over the next seven weeks all our classroom-based activities would take place in that room. This was a revelation to me as I thought most of our learning would happen while crawling through, or sitting in, mud. The room was somewhere behind the building where we had done all the paperwork the day before. That was, I learned,

the Admin Block and was the most modern building in the Barracks. The classroom itself was like any other modern (for 1988) schoolroom, with desks, chairs, windows that opened, and a whiteboard instead of a blackboard. It even had an overhead projector - for this was in the halcyon time before Powerpoint blighted the world.

Over the next few weeks I gained a reputation for being the bloke who always sat next to the windows and asked if he could open them - whatever the state of the weather. That room was hot and I needed all the fresh air I could get to stay awake.

I'm not going to detail the learning we endured in the classroom - unless I can think of some really interesting incident that happened during a particular lesson. I didn't enjoy being a student when I was at college; I didn't enjoy it any better when I was a soldier. Classroom-based study after the age of 16 sucks big cock (and not in a happy way), as far as I'm concerned.

PULHHEEMS: Physique; Upper limbs; Locomotion; Hearing (right); Hearing (left); Eyesight (right); Eyesight (left); Mental function; Stability (emotional). This trifle of goodies - alongside a quick blood test and all the fun of Kit Issue - was our work for the rest of the day, and most of the day following.

In practice, this meant the Troop being shambled between one place and another, then waiting in lines for stuff to be done to us. The main objective of the marching was to try and get us all to walk in-step with each other though, as we were all wearing our new Reebok trainers, we were under Orders not to stamp our heels into the tarmac.

The eye test was like every eye test I had endured at school: look at a piece of card a hundred miles away and guess the letters in each row. The hearing test was more fun as it involved being sat in a dark booth wearing big earphones and listening for beeps: press the left button for a beep in the left ear etc. My hearing test took ages and the results were not good: earwax - soon sorted by a medic with a huge syringe of soapy water.

The mental and emotional tests failed to pick up on my mental and emotional instability arising from these new and terrifying circumstances. The positive spin on this is that my derangements were within the expected range, meaning that many of my new mates were suffering in similar ways to me.

My blood type is O+, in case of an emergency.

Lunch was almost the same as the previous dinner, except tackled in daylight hours. Apart from being told off one time for sneaking a second helping of chocolate sponge and custard (the only decent thing the Army Catering Corps ever cooked for us), nothing interesting happened to me in the Mess, so I won't bother mentioning it again.

Kit issue proceeded as seen in every military film ever. We lined up in the Quarter Master (QM) Block, handed over our vital statistics, watched as stuff got dumped on the counter, signed for it, grabbed it in our arms and then moved away to any space available where we could start struggling to shove it all in our new kit bags. From head to toe, I got given: beret (1, black); cap badges (2); net scarf thing (1, never used); PT vests (1 white, 1 red); hairy shirt (more than 2); woolly jumper (1 or 2); camouflage jacket (1); belt (plastic, green, 1); gloves (leather, padded over the knuckles, 1 pair); PT shorts (black, 1 or 2 pairs); trousers (1 pair green, 1 pair camouflage); waterproofs (top and bottom, camo pattern, worn once); elastic bands (2); socks (woolen, 5 pairs); boots (DMS, size 8, 2 pairs); boot insoles (1 pair). And a green rucksack just like the ones the TA soldiers had had the day before.

Now we had our kit, we had to start learning how to maintain it. Actually wearing it for real wouldn't happen until Day 4, but we were encouraged to try out one of the pairs of boots that evening to get a head start on breaking them in (the other pair were placed in the display locker and not to be touched except for a light dusting before Inspections).

Cpl W showed us how to lace our boots in a special way, different to the normal way of lacing an Army boot. This involved sewing the boots together in a sort of cross-stitch, which may have indeed helped with the task of breaking them in but - as far as Dave the Para was concerned - was mainly to prove to everyone else in the Barracks that we were a bunch of twats who didn't know how to properly lace our boots.

Alongside strutting around in our new boots, we also had to start shaping our berets. To shape a beret from its frankly comical out-of-the-bag slump into something much more military and dashing, it has to be soaked and stretched. The stretching part was best done while wearing the wet cap, which led to much dripping over, and slipping on, the linoleum floors. The berets stayed on our heads until they dried, which took most of the evening. Then we brushed boot polish into the material and added the cap badges.

Polishing the boots was next on the list of things to learn. Boot polishing is both a craft and an art, with many different philosophies and trade secrets on how to bring a boot to that

perfect - almost sacred - level of shine. Once achieved (and it can take many days work to achieve it), it's almost a shame to then lace the fuckers to your feet and go stomping around the woods in them.

The technique that worked best for me involved Cherry Parade Gloss polish, water, soft rags and tiny, light circle work with my fingertips across the dimpled leather - no spit involved, though a gentle huff over the shine before the final wipe was generally enough to bring the steel-capped toes to the height of their black mirror beauty.

The main benefits of boot polishing were to: 1. Look like you were busy, which prevented NCOs giving you other work; 2. Get sufficient shine on the bastards to stop the Screaming Skull, well, screaming abuse at you; and 3. Catch up on the gossip. Most of the gossip in our room was shop-talk about what we had been taught that day, or listening to Dave the Para explain what we should have been taught about whatever, or negotiating who was going to do what in preparation for the next day's Inspection.

Much more interesting were the conversations we had about the strengths and shortcomings of people in other rooms and, especially, our Officers and NCOs. Cpl W quickly earned our loyalty and devotion, even when he wasn't wandering around the Block listening in on our chatter. The other Sections' corporals suffered in comparison.

Spooky Corporal was as young as Cpl W, and a bit more green-eyed-warrior in his approach to things. The tallest of the three, he was also the one who most liked to push our credibility by claiming that he was into black magic and stuff. Others may have fallen for his pulp-fiction horror stories, but I was born and bred in a part of the country where having a conversation with a neighbour, who routinely rearranged saucers of milk over her rockery to consult the fairies, could quickly lead to some unexpected chat. Everyone I knew on the Marshes had their odd quirks and superstitions, and I was brought up not to mock their beliefs - at least not within their hearing. Being ghost-blind myself, I was considered a bit of an oddity within the community.

Short Shouty Corporal hated me. To be fair I think he hated all recruits in an equal and unprejudiced manner, but there were times when I felt that he made an extra effort to direct his hatred at me. He was older and slightly shorter than me, and had a massively bushy black moustache clipped to his upper lip. I've never liked moustaches - which made growing up in the 1970s, when they were all the rage, particularly difficult; maybe some of this dislike leaked out and triggered a reaction in him? Who can ever know. I found out later that the other NCOs held the man in extremely high regard, which was nice for him.

Lance Corporal O was also an older man, tall and wiry, approachable. I found it easier to get along with him than with other NCOs, but that was probably one of my bigger mistakes. Looking back now, I think of him as mainly surface materials, with not much depth to the persona he presented to us. A soldier marking time, nothing more. He could shout as loudly as the others when required, but I always got the feeling that his heart wasn't fully committed to ripping the shit out of us.

It was LCpl O who introduced a group of us to the concept of ironing on Day 2 - as washing and ironing our kit prior to Inspections was also to become a major part of our barrack routine. Irons and ironing boards were not new mysteries to me: Mum - ever the practical sort - had taught me how to iron my own clothes from age 8, when I was finally able to lift her iron off the board without breaking my arm. Not that laundry and ironing were an integral part of my childhood routine: she had to earn her parental rights with some work.

The biggest challenge of ironing our uniforms turned out to be getting the creases exactly right in the trousers and - even with my extensive domestic experience - I sometimes steamed tramlines into the material, rather than the razor-sharp crease the NCOs expected to see at Inspection. A few weeks later Cpl W let us in on the secret of his ever-perfect creases: the sneaky bastard had sewn them permanently into the cloth using invisible thread.

Each item of our kit had its specified place in our display lockers. There was even a diagram printed on paper that we could use to get everything in the right order. The diagram - one copy shared between our Section's five rooms - also showed distances between items, hence increasing the need to borrow Dave's tape measure for stuff. We had to buy our own wooden coat hangers from the NAAFI - yet another unexpected expense which this time had to be funded from my dwindling supply of cash.

Another item on the shopping list were things called 'twists' - twisted elastic lengths with hooks at each end (miniature bungee cords) used to neatly tuck trousers at the top of the boot. These were much easier to use than the elastic bands we had been issued with, which snapped at the first opportunity.

The hardest, most fiddly part of doing the display locker? Balancing the spare cap badge on its tips on the top shelf. I spent so, so much time and effort getting that bastard pin to do its impossible balancing act. Many tears would be shed over the next few weeks when, as the NCO rummaged through clothes while Inspecting a locker, that fucking pin toppled over. A quiet "Oops!" in my ear would be enough to tell me that my next few minutes were about to become 'interesting'.

Remember the psychic's prediction about 'flags on my shoulder'? This is the day her prediction came true. Early in the evening Cpl W came into our room and handed each of us two loops of red ribbon.

"These are your flags. They go over your epaulettes. When you're wearing your jacket you put them on that. When you take your jacket off you transfer them to your jumper epaulettes. Understood?"

Dave the Para examined the items handed to him with some care. "They look a bit flimsy, Corporal," he concluded.

The man was right: we had seen the (yellow) flags Jee Troop wore on their shoulders, which were made of strong woven material. These were much thinner, more like the wide ribbon used to wrap Christmas presents when you're trying to be posh.

"Yeah," agreed Cpl W. "The RSM is on a drive to cut costs wherever possible, so he cancelled the order for the regular flags."

Within a day of wearing them, we hated our flags. Our epaulettes were held down at their ends by velcro, and each time we had to transfer the flags between jacket and jumper the ribbon would catch and fray in the velcro hooks. Then the stitching would go: some lads used sellotape to hold the ribbon in its loop; others tried tiny safety pins.

Losing a flag - a regular occurrence among Troop members on windier days - would lead to minor beatings (a few push-ups here, a couple of star jumps there) but the NCOs got annoyed by these ever-more-frequent interruptions and complained up the line. New flags were issued to everybody - but not proper flags.

The NCO vs RSM Battle of the Flags went on (at a distance, we only heard rumbles) for weeks; the Screaming Skull finally capitulated to the realities of the situation in Week 6 when we - finally - got issued with regulation standard red ribbons.

Wed 2 Nov: Day 3

0745-0815 - [Inspection] Intro

0820-1555 - Kit issue / PULHEEMS

1600-1640 - Identification of rank and chain of command

Remarks: Essential admin info

... bang bang Boom BANG FIRE MOVE YOUR FUCKING ARSES! FIRE!! BANG Boom
bang ...

Dave the Para had warned us before lights out: "Keep your trackies and trainers by the bed." He wouldn't say any more than that, despite whispered requests after I hit the light switch. "Fucking work it out for yourselves!" I think he was still sore about the bootlace thing.

Just after 0200 I was up and out of my bed, feet jammed in trainers and tackle covered in cloth, speeding along the corridor and down the stairs and out into the cold night - one among the herd stampeding towards the Parade Ground which was, according to the Fire Lecture we had sat through the day before, our allotted assembly point for any fire, bomb or other alert that could disturb our sleep.

Lads in other rooms didn't have the benefit of Dave's wisdom; many left the building wearing just their trainers and the blankets they had been sleeping in. A few were stupid enough to bring only their flesh: they learned the sharpest lesson from the drill as they were forced to stand in rank naked alongside us for ten minutes as the frost tried to meld their bare feet to the tarmac.

After our introduction to the mysteries of Inspection - where to stand, what to shout, when to shout it - it was time to get back to the PULHHEEMS. This time things got more physical.

We started off with a run, where once again I was happy to stay with the pack. The Bald Man's words (don't get noticed!) kept repeating in my thoughts, as I had Being-Noticed damage from Day 1 to repair. Then we moved into the Physical Training Block for our introduction to the gym.

Pull-ups on the beam: I managed six of them. But because there was no opportunity to hide in the pack I had to prove I meant each and every one of them. Which I did! As fit as I was, my upper-body strength sucked big time.

On the standing jump, I was better. When it came to the sprints my Inner Athlete finally escaped my control and decided to get competitive: I knew I was fast and I wasn't going to let any fucker best me!

... A strange thing was happening to me in that hall: for the first time in weeks, I felt joy in my veins. I hadn't done any sprint tasks since before Easter and my body - my mind - had missed the challenges of speed.

There may have been other tests - bunny hops over an upturned bench? Whatever. I had a finale to perform, my Great Achievement of the Day. The sit-ups test.

We were going round the various equipment stations in groups of a dozen. The last station for our group consisted of a bench which leaned at a pretty steep angle against the bars of a climbing frame. Our task was to lie on the bench with our feet high and hooked under a bar, cross our arms over our chests and, while blood rushed to our heads, perform as many sit-ups as we could manage.

Everyone managed five sit-ups; many made it to ten. With a bit of aggression, some got to 15. One lad managed 20, then another lad beat that mark by two.

I wasn't the last to go, but it was getting near to the end of the session. I sat on the bench and shuffled my feet upwards until I could feel the tops of my feet connect with the bar. I leant back ... and back more ... until skull bumped into wood. Eyes open, all I could see was the Corporal's crotch bulging in his shorts.

"Reckon you can beat 22, Roots?"

"Yes, Corporal," I said, quite surprised at my certainty - I had never done sit-ups on such a steep angle before. I closed my eyes; took myself to that quiet, concentrated athlete place in my head; started.

My sit-ups were unhurried, and full. I took a brief pause when I reached twenty, another when I reached thirty. By the time I reached forty I was double-breathing - two short pulls of air - on the returns, with a slow-pushed release on the lifts. As I approached fifty I heard people giving me encouragement, shouting out my name.

Athletics is a solo sport. You train, you compete; you don't expect to hear people calling out your name. At least I never did.

At fifty I took a longer rest; the muscles across my stomach and stretching down my legs were beginning to feel hot pain. I moved from groups of ten to groups of five - 55, 60. The next five were hard; my breathing was losing structure, my vocal cords vibrating as I huffed out. Then came the grunts - 63, 64, 65. Each sit-up now burned me.

No sodding way was I going to give up!

My last three sit-ups took as long as my first thirty. I bellowed! Sixty six. Sixty seven. I tried for another ... failed. A long rest - more than a couple of seconds - and I clenched every bastard muscle in my body to force-force-force my shoulder up to the Corporal's waiting fist ... "Sixty eight!"

I couldn't make seventy. I damn near blew the veins in my neck trying!

"Enough!" said the Corporal. There was nothing left for me to give, not even to unclasp my arms where they had welded themselves over my chest. I rolled off that bench and hit the

floor on my elbows, one foot still tangled in the metal bar. People - mates, now - helped me to my feet.

"Good job," said the Corporal. "Though we'll need to do some work on your upper body. Six pull-ups? That's fucking pathetic!"

We had our first Troop beasting in the gym that day. Sliding ourselves over the floor on our bellies for making it dirty with our (allegedly) muddy trainers. Even this felt like fun, at least to me.

'Keep your head down,' the Bald Man whispered between my ears as I stepped into the PT Block's communal showers. 'Don't get noticed ...'

For the first few weeks of basic training, much of that training happens in the evening: barrack routine. Keeping a room tidy; polishing stuff; making linoleum shine; learning to seek out dust from corners and crevices and eliminate it. I was not the tidiest kid to ever grace the world, but Mum made sure I understood the concept of tidiness, and the means to make it happen.

That evening most of our concentration was on making our new uniforms tidy and presentable, both on our bodies and in our display lockers. The next day would see our first Inspection dressed as soldiers and none of us were keen to make mistakes. I spent my time ironing, and polishing my boots. The ironing turned out to be a group task because, while we each did our own ironing, the number of irons and ironing boards available to us was limited - thus requiring negotiations between rooms for sufficient time with the tools to get our work done.

More interesting was something called the NAAFI run, which our room got to perform for the first time that evening.

I remember from the video I watched, on my second visit to the Army Careers Information Office, that it included a scene showing recruits relaxing in their local Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes bar, smiling and chatting about the work they had been doing that day. I had assumed that evenings in the NAAFI bar would be part of my Army experience too.

... I was so, so wrong.

Every barracks has (or had) a NAAFI, which generally includes a shop for buying essential stuff for life in the barracks, alongside the ubiquitous bar. They open early and close

late. Useful places. Unfortunately the NAAFI in Keogh Barracks, in late 1988 at least, was strictly off-limits to all recruits.

Dave the Para considered this situation to be unnatural and unnecessarily cruel. He tried to find out what had happened to bring this state of affairs about and had come back with a story about a previous Troop that had failed so miserably - only a handful of recruits had made it to the Passing Off Parade - that decisions had been taken up the Chain of Command to try and make the basic training experience a bit more 1950s for the Corps' recruits.

The argument was that most recruits were being directed to the Corps by ACIOs because they were not quite good enough to make it into a Regiment, but might be of some use on the battlefield as stretcher carriers. And given that the Corps had been struggling to attract sufficient numbers to its Flag since *M*A*S*H* had ceased broadcasting on the telly, they were happy to take whatever was thrown their way.

Which meant - as Dave the Para told it - that most recruits tended to be a bit idealistic and romantic, setting their expectations of what basic training would be like on films like *Carry On Sergeant*: in other words very harsh and very shouty. So why not give them what they wanted?

Thus the NAAFI was out of bounds to us. Except for the NAAFI run. Like it or not, we needed access to essential supplies such as sweets, coke and Cherry Parade Gloss boot polish, and we needed those supplies daily. So every evening one room in each Section would go to the other rooms in the Section and make a list of everything people wanted. Cash would be handed over and then the four intrepid explorers would head into the darkness to navigate to the NAAFI halfway across the Barracks.

The activity was time limited by the NCOs. On return our breath would be checked (by sensitive Corporal noses) for signs of alcohol. Then the fun of the distribution of goods and change would begin.

My order was generally the same each evening: one can of coke, one double Twix Bar. I also used to get a pack of 20 John Player Special Blue cigarettes each night but, as time went by and my smoking habit died back to just the essential fags, my stash became large enough to cut down to a couple of packs a week.

Smoking - was also restricted. While doing research to jog my memories I rewatched some TV documentaries (such as *Lads Army*, and *The Paras*) which included basic training scenes. I was shocked to see they included footage of recruits smoking in their rooms as they got on with their barrack routine. This was absolutely not my experience of smoking in the Army.

Keogh Barracks introduced smoking zones a long time before smoking zones became A Thing. Maybe they did it because of the word 'Medical' in the name of our Corps? Whatever. Smoking was banned in the Accommodation Block and most other buildings, and indeed in most of the open spaces between them. We had a smoking point outside our classroom, and another beside the shed on the edge of the Parade Ground, nestled under the railway embankment.

The only place I remember smoking indoors was at the bottom of our stairwell next to the Block exit - and inconveniently close to the Troop NCOs office. To be spotted taking too many fag breaks during barrack routine was an invitation to pain and humiliation. But it was also one of the few places where we could gather for the inter-Section gossip, so many non-smokers would take at least one break each evening beside the dustbin lid ash trays to catch up on the news.

The restrictions were very effective. When I arrived I was smoking 20 fags a day; by the time I left I was struggling to puff my way through six of them. If Keogh Barracks was an early trial of the far more widespread restrictions that us smokers have to live under today ... I can only apologise to the rest of the world for not making more of an effort to increase my nicotine intake during that harsh experiment!

Battle

Of the many, many people who start their journey towards an Army career by walking through the doors of an Army Careers Information Office - or, nowadays, applying online - many do not make it to Basic Training (reports in 2018 suggest 47% of applications fail). Of those who do, roughly one in four of them - 25 out of every 100 - will not reach their Passing Out Parade and go on to have an Army career.

There's three ways to fail basic training. For the unlucky, something medical will happen - an unforeseen accident or a previously undetected condition will lead to a medical discharge. And a few others will commit crimes - civil or military - while in training, giving the Army no choice but to discharge them dishonourably.

Most who fail, though, fail by their own choice. At some point during training they will decide that they've had enough, that the Army is not for them, and request a Premature Voluntary Release. The British Army is not an intentionally cruel institution and will usually

honour the request in swift and brusque fashion - usually within a day or two of the request being made; sometimes within hours. The first indication that a Troop or Squad will get that one of their mates has left is when they see the empty locker missing its padlocks, the bed with its mattress gone.

Back in the 1980s there was a darker side to PVR. Recruits who failed to meet the standards expected by their NCOs would be - encouraged, let's say - to PVR. No overt bullying (by the standards applying back then); rather a more pervasive effort to make the recruit feel unwelcome, unappreciated. Not wanted.

Meet Alcohol Breath Lad. I don't really remember him much: dark hair, fair skin. Taller than me, but a bit weedy. No more than 17 or 18 years old. He might have made it through basic training - become a decent soldier - except he managed to get on the NCOs' radars on Day One when he arrived at the Depot just a little bit too late, with the stench of alcohol on his breath. From that point on his card was marked: nothing he could do in those first few days was good enough by NCO standards. If he made an effort, the effort was never enough.

ABL, however, was not a quitter. Despite receiving NCO advice a number of times - often at harsh volume - that his best option was to PVR, he refused.

Next, the NCOs involved his roommates. This was the room closest to the stairwell on the first floor - the room that I came to think of as the Cursed Room. If ABL fucked up, then both he and his roommates received punishment - beatings - in the form of sit ups, press ups, maintaining stress positions, Show Parades for the whole room, etc, etc, etc.

ABL didn't take the hint. Discipline in the Cursed Room crashed. Now the whole of 3 Section were made responsible for ABL's performance: help this man improve, or face his punishments with him.

Given its cliché popularity in many, many films about men going through basic training, what happened next should be no surprise to anyone at all.

To try and repair the situation in the Cursed Room, the NCOs had moved Carl in - allegedly to spread his new expertise about all things Army to the less gifted. (We got Homeboy Lad in return - a long distance from a fair exchange in my view.) Also, he had done his spine in at this point so wasn't taking part in the more strenuous activities.

One evening Carl had had the idea of applying raw polish to the boots of everyone in the Section, ready for some woods-based activity the next morning. Because he was my best mate, and had asked for some help in his (very welcome) endeavour, I was in the room when the attack took place.

ABL was lying on his bed staring out of the window, as was normal at this point in his career. I was on the floor surrounded by boots while Carl sat on his bed applying polish.

Men piled into the room - a good half dozen of them. They were operating in silent mode, tracksuits and gasmasks aiding their anonymity. Each had a soap bar cudgel (bars of soap wrapped in towels), all whirling as they approached ABL's corner. One pushed a sock into the victim's mouth; the others went to work.

Have you ever wanted to be a hero? Dreamed of being that one person to step into the middle of a vicious attack and stop it?

I lost my temper big time.

"Get the FUCK out of here! Get OUT! How fucking DARE you! Get out you fucking COWARDS!"

I was already on my feet, heading towards the bed: "Don't fucking THINK I don't know WHO you are!"

I didn't hit anyone. I didn't even get between them and the bed. My weapon was my temper, and my words: "Fucking COWARDS, hiding behind your fucking GASMASKS! FUCK off back to your rooms and DON'T come back!"

As quick as they came they were gone. "CUNTS!" I shouted as I exited the room after them. I spent the next five minutes stalking up and down the corridor spitting venom at anyone who came within range. I was fucking raging: how dare they?

See, I hardly ever lose my temper but when I do it tends to come out scalding and it takes me a while to calm down.

Carl finally managed to get me less shouty and back into the Cursed Room. ABL was (of course) in floods of tears.

"It's your own fucking fault, you useless shit," I told him. "Why don't you just do us all a fucking favour and PVR!"

... Because it turns out I'm not that fantasy hero guy at all. I didn't give a toss that a bunch of lads had set out to bully and abuse a vulnerable young adult. All I cared about was that the twats had done it in the middle of the evening in the room closest to the stairwell where an NCO could have appeared at any moment to discover what was going on and land us – me! – in a completely new level of Hell that even the Devil himself had not thought could exist.

Anyways, the attack must have finally broken ABL's spirit: he PVRd the next day, leaving Carl in the Cursed Room with two empty metal beds to dust each morning before Inspection.

As for me? I requested my Premature Voluntary Release a good week - maybe more - before ABL left the Depot. Which goes to prove the man was way more determined to be a soldier than I ever was.

Thurs 3 Nov: Day 4

0745-0815 - [Inspection] Intro
0820-0900 - General welfare
0905-0945 - Intro to training syllabus
0950-1030 - ID photos
1100-1225 - Initial APFA
1345-1640 - Dental inspections
Remarks: Initial pay parade (10:30)

Stand By Your Beds - I think of those words, and my mind floods with feelings of touch: ankles tight and firm in boots; the scratch of ironed wool on my arms and across my back from the shirt; the light weight of the belt cinched over my jumper and around my waist; the soft line of the beret circling my shorn skull. Opposite me I can see Carl (always Carl, never Homeboy Lad) dressed as I am, as short as I am. The two Daves stand at ease on their mats to my left, Dave the Para stock still and bored, Other Dave more twitchy.

I can see Carl's display locker behind him. His cap pin on the top shelf is beginning to lean dangerously, primed to topple onto its side at first NCO glance. His socks have been folded into themselves so they smile - always smile, never frown - though a couple look a bit leery to me. Not the absolute perfect display we had all worked so hard to achieve, but not far off - he might get away with it today.

There's footsteps in the corridor, moving from one room to the next: "aTenHUN!" screams a voice, followed almost immediately with a bang as four right feet stomp down together hard on their mats. A number-rank-name-CORPORAL! comes from the mouth of the next inspectee - quite close now, next door. Our turn will be soon.

My hips are bored of being so still for so long. We've been stood at ease for coming up to half an hour now, relaxed yet alert. I take a chance and move them, shift them forwards then circle them slowly around the axis of my body.

"What the fuck ...?" silently mouths Carl, eyes wide and warning. I know it's dangerous to move with the NCOs so close by, but needs must. I offer him a small half-grin and bring my hips back into vertical alignment with shoulders and knees. I risk a quick peek down the length of my body, searching (as ever) for stray lint. The crease ironed into my trousers looks straighter than yesterday's attempt, which is a relief, and no ghost has come to take the shine from the leather over my steel toe-caps. The floor between the four of us also gleams under

the fluorescent strip light, still on as the sky beyond the window stays gloomy from thin dawn cloud.

Another number-rank-name-CORPORAL!, and another. This memory is of a day beyond the earliest days when the NCOs would chew faces from skulls for minor Inspection fails; now is the time for comments on what's been done well, what could be improved. Should screaming erupt then it will be for something more serious than a toppled pin or an unsmiling sock.

My gaze, as ever at this time of morning, fixes itself to just above Carl's right ear. Experience has taught me that keeping my eyes set on that point will keep my head tilted at the exact angle expected for Inspection. As a final number-rank-name-CORPORAL! sounds out I can see the edges of Carl's mouth tighten, his throat swallow and move as he prepares for his moment. I let my eyes unfocus, let my muscles relax in a gentle cascade from neck to shoulders to back to calves - as if priming myself for the sprint, the starter's gun.

Boot steps in the corridor, closer now, louder ...

"aTEN-HUN!" ... and SMACK go my fists into my thighs and BANG goes my heel on the floor.

This is the day when we were finally allowed to march properly. Now we had boots on our feet we could smack our heels really hard into the tarmac as we stepped forward, make a proper, loud thump to announce our approach to the world. That first day's attempt was a bit ragged, but we were improving at the keeping-in-step thing with some speed.

We also knew how to stand to attention, stand at ease, and stand easy. What we didn't yet know was how to transition between these positions, or how to swing our arms to the required angle as we marched, or how to salute. Even though it seemed to me like I had been in Keogh Barracks forever, that home was little more than a childhood fantasy, we had not yet had our first Drill session. I might have been dressed like a soldier, but I wasn't one yet.

I discovered as I marched away from the Accommodation Block that morning that there were patterns to be found in the camouflage jackets of the men marching in front of me. It became a sport, much like cloud watching, to gaze at the back of the man in front of me (more often than not Other Dave) and identify the barking dog, the jagged butterfly or, when he overstretched his left arm forward, the hint of a woman naked on her back with pert, gravity-defying tits thrust high.

Marching, I became calm. I needed those moments of calm, I welcomed them: everything else that was happening to me or around me was breathless and scary!

That afternoon we marched ourselves onto a luxury coach, hired to transport us to Pirbright Barracks and the dental checks that awaited. This was our first time outside Keogh in an eternity of three days, thus counted as excitement.

My Dentist Monster had long curly black hair and an excellent even-toothed smile - which proved she knew a good Monster of her own - and enough flesh on her bones to mark her out as a bustier kind of Monster. I opened my mouth obediently and went to my special I-Fear-No-Pain place in my head. She did some poking, scraping and measuring - the normal investigation stuff.

"You visit your dentist regularly?"

"Uh-uh," shaking head.

"When did you last go?"

I held up both hands, all digits extended.

"Ten months ago?"

"Uh. Ears!"

"Ten years ago! Well that will explain the mess I'm seeing." I heard her words as I gazed up her nostrils. "Do you know you've got an abscess on this tooth here?" She helpfully knocked a metal prod on my all-cement tooth which, once again, was in mid-eruption.

"Esh," I agreed.

"It must be really painful? When did it start?"

"En ears aho."

She stood straight, eyes widened, giving me the opportunity to close my mouth. "Ten years?"

"Yeah. It doesn't hurt though, Ma'am There's nothing left of that tooth to hurt."

"Well, it's still going to have to come out. And you have a couple of cavities that need filling. And some lessons on proper oral hygiene; you really need to start looking after your teeth. Tell your people I need to see you at nine thirty tomorrow morning. Off you go now!"

I really ought to add some background infodump to give meaning to this encounter.

When I was a kid I used to visit a Dentist Monster in Hythe whom I will always think of as 'That Torturing Bastard'. Because he was a torturing bastard.

One of my hobbies in my younger days was collecting phobias: wasps, water, heights, crowds, needles, etc, etc - I had a good collection of them by the time I was ten. But I never developed a phobia about going for dental checkups. I was never scared of Dentist Monsters: I hated them! There is a difference.

Teeth were not a particular concern of mine; they were not part of my daily routine. My parents had tried to teach me the basics of how to brush my teeth but my view was if Bruce the Dog didn't have to clean his teeth, then why should I? They fought the battle valiantly, and soon lost. I had a toothbrush that lasted me seven years, so seldom was it used.

Mum knew her responsibilities though and every Spring and Autumn, as punishment, she would drag me forcefully onto the bus to go and visit TTB. And because TTB was a torturing bastard, one visit would turn into a further three or four so he could, he claimed, fix the damage caused by my neglectful behaviour.

TTB had a surgery that looked pretty much like every other torture chamber across the civilized world. There was a padded chair on a central column with a big bright moveable light above it; there was a bank of drills and tools that could be dragged across the room. There was a spittoon with pink water beside the chair. There was also the tray of needles.

Needles were one of my favourite phobias: the sight of a needle would set me screaming for a good half hour. These needles were huge, and curved, and vicious enough to force me beyond the point of screaming. I would stare at them; they would stare at me.

"Do you want an injection this time? It barely hurts at all and really will make things a lot easier."

"NO!"

He would never push the issue, maybe because the one time he had tried to force a needle into my young mouth I had punched him in the bollocks so hard he had had to take a five minute break to recover. So each time work needed to be done he would shrug his shoulders, tell me to relax and start drilling my teeth without any local anaesthetic to numb the pain.

And I would take it. No screams, no tears. Because when I was very young, laid back in that evil chair, I had discovered a trick. If I gazed just past the label on the bright light TTB would pull down into my face as he worked, and if I let the thoughts stop - apart from my Mum's advice: if you ignore it, the pain will go away - a special I-Fear-No-Pain place would

open up in my head, a place where I could hide and relax while the atrocities being committed in my mouth carried on.

Anyways. TTB had a special favourite tooth - the first molar in my lower left jaw. Every Spring he would examine it and declare that the filling was crumbling, which meant it needed to be replaced. Which meant the filling had to be drilled out, and the cavity widened, and new filling forced into the gap.

As the years went by, and Mum finally trusted me to attend my appointments unsupervised, the work on the molar became more complex. Slowly, filler replaced dentine and enamel, meaning that the cement had to be worked and shaped with strange new torture implements to supply the tooth with a high, stable grinding surface.

Any decent Dentist Monster would've extracted the tooth and had done with it. Not TTB. This was his special little goldmine, supplying him with a regular source of work for which he could charge extravagant amounts to the NHS. He tended that tooth with much love and care, and I endured the horror of it all - with no anaesthetic - until that one glorious Spring day in my fourteenth year when I told him he could: "Fuck off forever, you torturing bastard!" and walked out of his surgery, and the building, never to return.

That afternoon I brought a new toothbrush (and the biggest bar of chocolate I could afford) and started to clean my teeth both properly and vigorously, morning and evening. A month later the abscess under my all-cement tooth first appeared; the most pain I ever had from it was a dull ache in my jaw.

And now? The termination of my ex-tooth had been ordered. And - as ever - I had a new set of appointments with Dentist Monsters to look forward to.

Barrack routine - it was not just polishing boots and ironing uniforms and making bed blocks and setting up our display lockers perfectly. It was making everything in the Accommodation Block sparkle.

Bumpers - lead blocks on sticks which have to be pushed over linoleum many, many times to bring the floor to a gleam. Lino tiles covered most of the floor in the Block: in our rooms; along the entire length of the long corridor; in some of the utility rooms opposite our bedrooms. The main reason for making men push and pull lead weights across floors must have been to build their upper body strength. And because there was a limited supply of

bumpers available to everyone, negotiating the use of a bumper helped build teamwork within the Section.

To get a floor to shine, first you wax it. Every square inch of it. On hands and knees. Then you rub it with a cloth. Then you do your first bumper run, sliding the weight backwards and forwards until the shine begins to show. At this point someone has to donate one of their blankets to the cause, because the final part of the job is to bumper everything again, this time with the blanket between the lead and the lino.

Later we learned that Jee Troop (as ever) had discovered - or been told - a way of taking their floor to that final pinnacle of shine.

"Air freshener! You spray it over the floor, then give it a quick final bumping with the blanket just before Stand By Your Beds."

"But why?" I asked, not fond of the idea of having to rebuild my bed block in a rush.

"Because as soon as the Corporal marches into the room, he'll go skidding across the floor and land on his arse!"

Of course we tried it. It didn't work. When New Corporal stepped into our room he immediately smelt lavender and took evasive action. Cost us 40 press-ups each.

The other major task was keeping a utility room spick and spark. Each room got assigned a utility room, except one unfortunate room which got the job of polishing the Section's half of the long corridor.

Me, Carl and the Two Daves were given the wash-and-dry room to look after. The room was divided into two halves by a half-long wall, with sinks in the first bit and some washing machines, tumble dryers and big hanging rails in the other. The floor, for a change, was some sort of knobbly ceramic tiles which must have come out of the furnace looking dirty.

Dave the Para checked over our new charge through the doorway and saw an opportunity: "This will be fun!"

"How?" asked Carl. His eyes looked like mine felt, wide with the thought of having to spend hours on our hands and knees scrubbing.

"There's a step down into the room, there's a hose on the wall, and there's a drain in the middle of the floor. What we do is block up the drain with a towel -" mine, as it turned out "- flood the place with water and some washing powder, then use those big brooms to do the scrubbing!"

"What, every day?" asked Other Dave, the panic in his face clear at the thought of being screamed at for damaging Ministry Of Defence property.

"Nah. Once'll be enough. After today we can just use the mop for the bits picked out by the lights."

Dave - as ever - was right. We walked out of that room soaked, dripping water over the freshly polished corridor and earning some threats from the corridor-polishing crew.

As things turned out, keeping the floor clean wasn't the main task. The drain in the middle of the floor was plated brass. The taps and pipes to each sink were plated brass. That brass needed to be shined, and had an annoying habit of losing its shine as soon as anyone breathed on it. Add to this the fact that most of the Section chose to shave in those sinks just before SBYB time - we had some juicy arguments with our Section teammates over that issue. I got into the habit of guarding the washroom so I could give people the pleasure of my foul gob should they attempt a quick last-minute shave.

... Ahh, Karma. You can be a cruel bitch at times!

After a few weeks these jobs got swapped around and we took over the task of polishing the corridor. From Day 2 we had all learned never to walk down the middle of the corridor; instead we always - always! - stuck to the sides of that space, walking along the single row of black tiles which ran along each wall. Nobody ordered us to do this. Rather it was out of sympathy for the poor bastards who had to polish and bumper it every night. By the time the Two Daves, me and Homeboy Lad inherited the work my vocabulary were sufficiently developed to singe the skin from the back of any recruit-shaped twat stupid enough to put their foot, or boot, in the middle of my hard labour.

Being done at Inspection for fucking up my uniform, or my locker, or our room - yeah, I deserved that. Being done for when some thoughtless fucker bugged up our utility work ... that was nasty.

Fri 4 Nov: Day 5

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 1] Intro
0905-0945 - History of the RAMC
0950-1030 - Visit to RAMC Historical Museum
1100-1140 - RC Parade / TP Comds disposal
1145-1225 - [PT 1]
1345-1425 - Read Schick test, TABT 1 / Polio 1
1430-1555 - [FIN M 1] Rates of pay and deductions
1600-1640 - Kit insurance
Remarks: Barrack routine

"ROOTS! Get your fucking USELESS arse here!"

"He needs a broom, Corporal!"

"You HEARD the Sergeant! That broom by the wall ... THAT one! Hold it up ... BOTH hands, you TWAT! ... For fuck's sake! NO, idiot! Arms WIDE with the broom ... Higher ... that's it! Why the FUCK are you standing there? I gave you a fucking ORDER! Get your fucking ARSE over HERE!"

I ran with the heavy wooden broom high above my head, skirting around the end of the Troop stood at attention in their ranks outside the Accommodation Block, and made my way at a brisk jog towards Cpl W.

"Stand still! You call that fucking STANDING? Push your fucking chest FORWARD! ... Finally, he gets something right! You see that gate?"

I looked to my right and saw the metal gate in the perimeter fence, some distance beyond the PT block: "Yes, Corporal!"

"Run there, and run back ... Did I tell you to FUCKING jog? RUN, you fuckwit! ... Arms straight and fucking HIGH! - RUN!"

0815 and my day wasn't going well. It was going well at 0515 when Dave the Para's radio woke up and decided to blare out Enya's *Orinoco Flow*. It took a dip a few minutes later when I finally worked out I was not having a nightmare, that I was still stuck in Hell. It did pick up after my shave and shower, when I returned to the room at 0540 to the sound of Londonbeat's *9am (on a New York Subway)*. It was fairly steady as me and Carl and the Two Daves returned from breakfast and started on our morning duty - clearing latecomers out of the wash-and-dry room and shining every enamelled sink and brasses fitting in it.

The arse fell out of my day when I found Cpl W and told him that the Busty Dentist Monster was expecting to see me at 0930.

"You what?"

"She told me I had to be back there at 0930 this morning, Corporal. She's going to take my tooth out."

"And you decided that now would be a good time to share this information?"

In my defence, I did think this was a good time, as I'd only just remembered her words. I had been fretting so much about the appointment the previous evening I had forgotten to mention it to anyone.

"Corporal!" I bellowed, knowing there was no good answer to his question.

I could see that even this was not a good enough response. The man wanted - needed! - to go spare in my face. He really ached to scream abuse, but the time was 0728 and the Section needed to be Stood By Their Beds and now was not the appropriate moment for doing the Going Spare Thing.

The battle of muscles across his face was impressive. Finally he managed to release a chilling whisper: "Fuck Off, Roots! Just - fuck off. Now!"

Of course I had endured beatings before, but they had all been group affairs, the whole Section doing press-ups or sit-ups or star jumps or whatever for some failing or another. This was my first solo beating, to be performed in front of the entire Troop.

I got back from my trip to the gate out of breath and arms aching from the weight of the heavy broom above my head.

"I reckon he could've done it a bit faster, Corporal. Do you reckon he could've done it a bit faster?"

"Did you HEAR the Sergeant, Roots? Do it AGAIN! And this time put some FUCKING EFFORT into it!"

... I didn't get to visit the Busty Dentist Monster at 0930 that morning.

I'm looking at the timetable and I can see today was a day of firsts: our first Drill lesson; our first Physical Training session; our introduction to looking after the pennies the Army would soon be paying us.

I have a very clear memory of wandering around the RAMC Museum. I've just checked Google and despite many warnings and threats the museum - now known as the Museum of Military Medicine (museumofmilitarymedicine.org.uk) - is still located at Keogh Barracks and is (in 2018) open every weekday, with free entry for all. The tools of the trade are as gruesome as you would expect, and the tableaux come with great quantities of blood and gore - the kids will love it!

Of the day's other events, the PT stands out most in my mind because it was at the end of that session when I received my first Command Task threat.

The session was made up of various exercises to perform. The last was sets of very short sprints across the width of the gym. Halfway through the exercise I lost count of how many sets of sprints I had done and, as normal for me, had decided to start again. It meant I did more sets than everyone else and, unusually, finished a sprints exercise behind most of the other lads.

Unknown to me, I was being observed. As we were dismissed and heading towards the showers Short Shouty Corporal called me over.

"What do you think you were doing out there?"

"Corporal?"

"I tell you what you were doing out there. I saw you cheating! While everyone else did the full set of sprints, I watched you! I saw what you did!"

"Corporal?"

"You thought you could get away with doing less than everyone else. You thought nobody would see you cheat. If there's one thing I can't fucking abide in this world, it's a cheat, Roots! And not just a cheat; but a lazy fucking cheat! You hearing me, Private? Were you cheating?"

"No, Corporal"

"And a fucking liar, too! Well listen up, Soldier. You're on my fucking radar, now. I know your fucking face and I tell you I ain't happy to see your lying, lazy, cheating face in my fucking Corps! Do you understand me?"

"Corporal!"

"I won't tolerate it! Know this: from this moment on I'm gonna have my eyes on your lying, cheating arse twenty-four seven. You ain't even gonna sneeze without me fucking knowing about it! And I'm gonna do everything in my power to make your fucking life a misery. I'm gonna make it my Command Task to make you so fucking miserable you'll be begging me to let you fucking PVR!"

... I had no answer. I had been fairly sure the man was not my friend before our chat; now I was certain. I knew what a Command Task was, because Cpl W had described it to Alcohol Breath Lad on Day 1: an overarching objective that a soldier had to achieve, would do everything they were capable of doing to achieve. And the way the NCOs harried ABL after the Command Task had been issued had been scary - uncomfortable - to watch.

"Fuck off, Roots! You're making my eyes bleed with rage!"

"Corporal!" I shouted, and duly fucked off, convinced in my head that ABL would no longer have to suffer his abuse alone.

Disasters come in threes. I had decided this saying was a True Thing soon after puberty overwhelmed me, so I was half-expecting the woe of my day to reach a final crescendo.

We had been told when we first got our camouflage jackets that we were not to fill the pockets with any old rubbish. Every pocket on the jacket - of which it had many - had a purpose, which we would be learning about over the coming weeks. Until we learned what a pocket was used for, we were to keep it empty.

I know I heard the words at the time, because I can remember hearing them. I have no explanation for how, or why, I forgot them. Or ignored them, for one specific pocket.

Most of my camouflage jacket pockets were empty. But there was one particular pocket at the top of the left arm that was just too conveniently placed for me to ignore. Soon after we were permitted to wear our jackets I started slipping my loose change into it.

The Troop beasting - probably for sloppy marching, though at the time I believed differently - came at the end of the day, and took place on a square of deliberately muddied lawn between the two wings of the Accommodation Block closest to the PT Block.

"Undo every button on your jackets ... All of you ... Every fucking button! ... Now run around the edge of the grass ... I want to see you swing your fucking arms in full circles as you run ... Full fucking circles: put some effort into it! ... Now the right arm only ... Now the left arm only ... Now both arms backwards ... Keep running ... swing those fucking arms faster! ..."

In two days I'd managed to build up a fair collection of loose change in my pocket. Every last penny of it ended up in the muddy grass churned up by sixty pairs of almost-new, no-longer-shiny boots trampling across it.

"Which one of you fucking IDIOTS put money in their jacket pockets?" This was the PT Staff Sergeant, a gruff-yet-decent bloke I was already beginning to admire. "You've littered my fucking lawn with change ... I can see pound coins! It's my lucky fucking day!"

Looking back, I reckon this beasting was a timetable regular, because I doubt I was the only fucking idiot to use that pocket for their loose change, or cigarette lighters, or whatever else a new recruit might decide to stow in it. It also served the purpose of making certain we all started the evening's barrack routine with muddy boots and muddy floors to polish.

... But enough had happened to me on Day 5 to leave me convinced the Troop were being beasted because Short Shouty Corporal, or some other NCO, had spotted me slipping change into my pocket. Everyone was suffering because of my stupidity. That unexpected feeling of guilt left my throat feeling sore as I ran around in the mud swinging my arms like propellers.

"HALT! The fucking idiots who've littered my lawn with their change step forward! Because I want every fucking penny picked up! The rest of you can fuck off!"

One particular idiot - me - thought about the Order for about half a second, then fucked off along with every other member of the Troop. Eight quid bought a lot of choccie bars and cokes (and fags) back in 1988, but I'd had enough shit for one day: let the bastard keep it!

I was tired. I was fed up with all the shouting. I was angry at being on the receiving end of costly, painful beatings and unfair Command Task threats. Shouty bastards with vicious moustaches were accusing me - me! - of cheating and lying! I was too tired, and too scared, to think straight anymore ... as pity parties went, this one was building up towards balloons and confetti.

"All part of the fun of an Army life," said Carl later, as we shared a final ciggie before lights out.

"Army can fucking shove it!" was my response. If Uber had existed in 1988, I would've been out of the gates and AWOL before the next day's dawn.

Sat 5 Nov: Day 6

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 2] Attention and At ease
0905-0945 - [SY 1] The threat
0950-1030 - [SY 2] Alert and protection
1100-1225 - Visit Aldershot / photographs etc
1345-1640 - TP Comds disposal
Remarks: Barrack routine

Let me introduce you to the Screaming Skull.

He was a short man (though taller than me) with a thrust-forward chest and a throat and mouth wide and deep enough to comfortably park a horse and cart. He shaved his head daily, and probably polished it with some variant of Parade Gloss because I swear blind when he stood with his back to you, you could see your own face - usually flushed red or drained white - reflecting from it.

I remember his moustache was thick yet well clipped - a salt-and-pepper affair to attest to his advancing age. Yet age would never defeat him: he was fitter than most of the NCOs under his command, and a lot fitter than most of us recruits.

His attire was always - always! - immaculate, putting the efforts of every Officer who crossed his path to deep shame. His pace stick - wooden, and naturally polished to a glint to almost rival his skull - rarely left his side. Not that he needed its assistance: I could tell

instinctively that every step that man took would be accurate to the millimetre. The stick reflected the straightness of his back and the angles of his shoulders and hips, elbows and knees, wrists and ankles - an inadequate map of the thing it represented.

His scream was dry, deep and highly articulate. Often the commands that issued from his mouth were more strangles than words, sounds that I was soon trying to copy at a volume that attempted to approach his own.

The dryness of his scream surprised me, as I had always associated people screaming in my face to receiving a shower of spits - the emphasis to the action. This man was too efficient to waste moisture on recruits. Spittle, in his view, was for perverts.

Sometimes we would meet him in the Accommodation Block, or the Admin Block, or jumping from bushes in the woods to scream at us in surprise attacks. But his natural home was the Parade Ground, his territory, his manor, his kingdom. Nothing was permitted to litter that acre of rectangular, flat tarmac. No vehicle; no leaf; no cigarette butt. Especially that last one. The man detested smokers, partly for abusing their bodies, but mainly for defiling his Sacred Ground with the wastes of their filthy habit.

The Screaming Skull: a precision instrument self-honed from flesh and bone ... he was magnificence personified! He was also, of course, barking mad.

I genuinely respected and adored that man!

... Oh, okay. You got me. This portrait of the Screaming Skull, so lovingly detailed above, bears nothing more than a passing resemblance to the real man who was our Regimental Sergeant Major.

This is the battle I fight: to uncover the grit of reality from the froth of 30 years of mis-remembering and fantasy creation. Not that I've spent 30 years creating my Screaming Skull myth: thinking about my Army career - reminiscing it - fell down my list of priorities pretty quickly after I walked out; for the past 25 years I've barely thought about it at all, until these last few weeks.

The real Screaming Skull was a man, not a myth. On the whole a decent and hard-working man whose job was to run the RAMC Recruitment Division as best he could. His main focus - apart from teaching us Drill when he had time available - was to manage the NCOs under him, and the Officers above.

The NCOs, of course, had definite opinions about him, as we all have about the abilities and irregularities of our bosses. Some of those opinions trickled down to us recruits, which helped to form the bedrock of my Screaming Skull myth.

Outside of Drill, for instance, I rarely saw him scream. When I did witness him losing his temper, he directed his invective at his NCOs, not us. On the few occasions when I talked directly to him, he spoke quietly and evenly. Even when he Charged me - twice! - he never raised his voice.

I suppose the appreciation I felt for him, when I first started this memory exercise, comes from my own experiences of working closely with people tasked with delivering important Government policies and projects. Difficult work can bring out the best in people, and the worst, and on that measure my memory of the RSM is that he performed his work well.

Even so, the (small) part of me that was admiringly terrified of him hopes he has no memory of me whatsoever.

Drill is the military equivalent of Country-and-Western Line Dancing. I am not one of God's natural-born dancers, but Line Dancing I can do. I can't do it well: I haven't had the opportunity, or volume of alcohol required to get me on my feet and in line, to become proficient in the art. But when I do join in, and become a part of the group, and our steps synchronise near-perfectly to each other and to the beat of the music - it's the closest thing to a spiritual experience I have ever managed to achieve.

One thing I had been dreading before I started basic training was all the marching and saluting stuff. At the most anti-militaristic phases of my life (in other words: college), marching and saluting were the exact opposite of what I wanted to be in relation to the rest of the world. Only stupid people, I would tell anyone with the patience to listen to me, would be stupid enough to submit themselves to all that stupid marching and saluting nonsense.

... Oh, foolish youth!

My first Drill lesson was okay. My second was much better. By the time I reached my third Drill session I was in thrall to the concept.

Drill would start with instruction - NCOs showing each stage in that day's movement, and the words we needed to shout out as we assumed the required positions. Then we would be broken into small groups and spread across the Parade Ground to practice by ourselves.

Before the end of the session the Troop would gather and attempt the movement as a single, well-oiled machine.

I tried as often as possible to be the person in my small group who got to shout out the Order as we practiced, then join in the shouting as we stepped through the parts of the movement. To my astonishment, I discovered I enjoyed shouting as loudly as my lungs would let me. To be told to let someone else have a go - that hurt me. I had finally discovered my roar, and I wanted the world to fucking hear it!

Home Troop's Command Task on Day 6 was to venture into Enemy Territory (Aldershot) to hunt down and bring back essential items that we had forgotten to bring with us to basic training. In my case that consisted of one iron, and one ironing board.

I invested in a good iron; it stayed by my side for the best part of a decade as I ventured my way through various squats and bedsits at the start of my London adventure. The ironing board I bought that day was a bugger to carry anywhere - for all I know it remains in Keogh Barracks to this day.

In the afternoon we had our first Troop Commander's Disposal. TCD periods are littered through the timetable, sometimes as short as 40 minutes, sometimes as long as most of a day. They were not 'free time' for me to do stuff that I wanted to do; in all of the 50 days I was in basic training I only enjoyed three periods of 'free time'.

Instead these were times that were organised by NCOs for us to do extra, untimetabled stuff. Catching up on barrack routine, for instance, or heading outside for a game of football. With no further hints from the timetable - I never wrote on, or marked, my copy in any way - my memory fails me: I remember nothing of the specifics of what I got up to during any of these periods.

The timetable does help me recall one specific event for Day 6: Bonfire Night. Somebody had built a bonfire in front of the church and, as darkness fell, we were marched away from the accommodation block (in uniform) so we could attend the festivities.

"I want to hear you all go 'ooohh!' when the rockets set off, and 'aaahh!' when they explode," ordered Cpl W, "and put some fucking effort into it!"

"OOOHH!" we responded at the appropriate moments. And: "AAAHH!"

The bonfire was well attended. This was the first time I realised that the Depot was not just our home; other people lived there too. Cpl W, for instance, had a wife and kid and lived in Married Quarters in a part of the Depot we very rarely visited. Many of the other staff lived outside the perimeter fence and only came to the Depot to work - Bonfire Night offered those people a chance to bring their families through the main gates to see where they spent their days.

The event lasted over an hour and was very informal - though we still had to mind our 'Sergeants' and 'Sirs' as we mixed with the crowd. I played safe that night and stuck firmly by the sides of people I knew and recognised (in other words: Carl). I remember we wrote our names in the air with sparklers. A happy memory.

Sun 6 Nov: Day 7

0820-0900 - [Inspection] TP staff
0905-1030 - Church
1100-1245 - TP Comds disposal
1345-1640 - Training area walk in full combat dress
Remarks: Church (09:30)

I liked Boxer Bloke. He was big and solidly muscled, heading towards Heavyweight class, with one of the thickest Brum accents I had ever come across. He was also, through no fault of his own beyond being born with the wrong surname, one of the original members of the Cursed Room. I first encountered him one-on-one in the showers early one morning where he was completing his daily 200-pushups-before-breakfast routine.

His recruitment story demonstrates the shameless nature of Army recruiters back in the 1980s. The man was passionate about boxing - thought of nothing much else. When he walked into his Army Careers Information Office the local recruiter picked up on this and, deeming him a little too damaged for the Infantry, persuaded him that the Royal Army Medical Corps would be the perfect place for him to develop and hone his boxing skills. When Cpl W told him on Day 1 that the closest the Corps came to practicing the Noble Art was watching title fights on the telly, BB damn near burst into tears.

Still, BB was a generally cheerful kind of giant and I'd always greet him pleasantly while I showered and he added on a few extra push-ups to his routine, for good luck.

I mention him on this day because this was the day when we first got to go on manoeuvres in the (dry) mud. Most of the afternoon was spent wandering through woodland (looking for man-eating rabbits) but we also had a session introducing us to basic fieldcraft

tactics such as lying on our bellies in a circle with our legs overlapping so we could count off, walking across a field in a couple of different rifle section formations, and watching our leader for hand signals while moving, stopping and changing our formation in response to them.

We were divided into groups of eight for this exercise, and had to choose our own leader. I had been maliciously separated from my roommates so ended up in a group of six complete strangers and BB - recognisable to me on the entirely racist grounds of being the only Black man in our Section.

<silence>

Me: "So who's gonna be our leader?"

<more silence>

I wasn't going to be group leader; the position looked to me like an invitation to being shouted at, plus Short Shouty Corporal was on the prowl and I was busy making sure I stayed out of his sight wherever possible.

Me, to BB: "You can be leader. Anyone disagree?"

BB's face broke into a huge grin at the invitation; other wannabe leaders too scared to speak up looked suitably crestfallen.

As a group, we mostly got that very simple exercise right. I also got the benefit of BB counting me in his 'friends' group rather than his 'not friends' group which, given his size and levels of fitness, suited me down to the ground.

BB was the first to fall victim to the Cursed Room. One afternoon Short Shouty Corporal barked once too often in the man's direction; he responded by punching SSC's lights out with a single blow to the face.

Carl told me all about the event: "Place went apeshit! Tons of NCOs and Officers running around. BB got dragged out - took him off to the Guardroom. He hasn't been seen since!"

"Was there blood? Tell me there was blood!" I wasn't in the Accommodation Block at the time - I was probably visiting the Busty Dentist Monster - which was a pity: I would have paid a week's wages to watch BB's fist smack into SSC's gob.

"Dunno - I was staying well away," said Carl, rubbing his ragged finger in circles over the heel of his boot.

Of course BB got Charged bigtime, and chose to go for a Court Martial rather than accept the Commanding Officer's judgment. He spent the rest of my time in the Corps in one of the Guardroom cells while waiting for all the legal stuff to be set up ready to try his case.

I did see him again, once, on the day Jee Troop had their Passing Out Parade. For complex reasons I was doing some work in the Guardroom.

"Here," said a Warrant Officer, pointing over at BB returning from the toilets with an empty piss bucket. "I bet you can't do as many push-ups as our prisoner."

"I bet you're right, Sir." I replied, nodding at BB who gave me a big smile in response. "But I know I can do more sit-ups than him."

At some point during Week 1 Acid House Lad suffered his birthday. Given the amount of acne the poor lad wore on his face I reckon it was one of his later teenage birthdays. Now I have never been a great fan of birthdays (or birthday celebrations); nowadays I make an effort to be well outside the borders of England whenever my birthday turns up. AHL was a lot less lucky in 1988; for him the NCOs arranged a special birthday celebration.

The Troop had been summoned outside to stand in Ranks soon after dinner concluded. I was wondering what someone had done now to get us all another Troop beasting.

"Grab him!" shouted one Corporal, pointing at AHL. "Strip him naked!"

I think of the lad as Acid House Lad because I always remember him wearing a t-shirt with one of those huge yellow smiley acid house faces on the front (because: 1988 = Summer of Love). I also remember that his real smile, rarely absent from his face, was bigger than his t-shirt smile. We shared the misfortune of being among the shortest recruits in the Troop, which sometimes led to us (and Carl) being cut from the herd to perform strange and mysterious rites such as being dressed in white smocks so we could pretend to be the church choir.

However this night - his birthday night - he was on his own. He put up a struggle, but was soon enough naked and stood in front of us all, his smile struggling to widen and his eyes bewildered.

"Tonight we shall all sing Happy Birthday to Pte AHL," announced another Corporal. "And then we shall give him the bumps!"

I joined in the singing - quietly, but making sure any NCO watching me would see my mouth moving - and counted along as AHL was bundled into a blanket and tossed into the air the requisite number of times.

"What have you fuckers done to our Birthday Boy? Look at the state of him!"

"He's covered in muck, Sergeant!"

"We can't leave him like that. You lot - grab those brooms. Blanket crew: take him over to the pond and chuck him in. Time for a Regimental Bath!"

... *The fuck?*

I watched in a state of growing horror as the ritual progressed. This was not a beasting: it was a team bonding session where we gathered together to perform fun-yet-beastly things to each other. Proper Boys Own stuff. Maybe such things happened regularly in Scouts, or Cadets? I didn't know: I was never a member of any such organisation when I was a kid. Everyone around me was enjoying the spectacle, joining in with various catcalls and jokes. I tried to laugh alongside everyone else, but my brain was frozen in terror.

Because I knew at that moment that - if I had lost the argument with the Colonel at my Final Selection interview - it wouldn't have been AHL sitting in the pond dodging brooms. It would have been me, at the end of September, naked and wet and desperately trying to keep a laugh in my throat as Jee Troop tried to scrub me clean.

Anyways. AHL soon recovered and - I don't know how - some kind of team bonding magic worked that night. And although it took a while for the ice pick lodged in my skull to loosen, the magic was strong: even I found the courage to laugh and joke with strangers (while sober!) when I went downstairs for my final fag that evening.

Mon 7 Nov: Day 8

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 3] Stationary turns
0905-0945 - [ED 1] Relay messages
0950-1030 - [MIL LAW 1] Intro and prevalent offences
1100-1140 - [DRILL 4] Stationary turns
1145-1225 - [PT 2]
1345-1425 - [ED 2] Record messages
1430-1510 - [MIL LAW 2] Civil and military law
1515-1555 - [ED 3] Reporting and observation
1600-1640 - [MIL LAW 3] Summary / Disposal / CM appeals
Remarks: Fitting of respirators

Some days were fun days where we got to go outside and play in the (dry) mud. I look at the timetable for Day 8 and the only memories I catch trickling through my head are the ones where I'm standing on one leg in the middle of the Parade Ground with my thigh held horizontal to the ground as I pivot on a foot in (hopefully) the right direction.

Spending most of a day in an overheated classroom, willing myself to stay awake as some bloke stands in front of us all wittering on about this thing or that thing - it's not fertile terrain

for forming long-term memories. Whatever notes I made during the lessons are long lost, and good riddance to them.

So instead I shall write about my second meeting with Busty Dentist Monster which definitely took place in Week 2 but I can't pinpoint the exact day.

Thinking about it now, I reckon BDM suffered from the P Thing almost as badly as I do, because she had almost no memory of me whatsoever.

"So you're telling me you've had an abscess on this tooth for what? Ten years?"

"Esh, Amm!"

"Do you know, I saw a man last week who had been suffering with an abscess for ten years? I was going to fix it for him, but he never showed up for the appointment."

"At wash ee, Amm!"

"Remarkable, seeing two such cases in the space of a fortnight. Anyway, I'm going to have to extract it. Let's get some local into that gum and then we can whip it out!"

... And the moment came. That specific, horrific moment that I had been fighting to avoid for the best part of 24 years.

The needle that lifted into my line of sight was gently curved into a vile grin. The syringe it attached to looked huge and metallic and just like the decorating tool my Mum used to pipe icing onto her cakes.

"Just a bit wider ... you'll feel a sting, but it'll soon be numbed ... that's it! All done. We'll give that five minutes then get to work!"

... *The fuck??*

The injection ... hadn't hurt!

"That didn't hurt at all," I told her as the left half of my lower jaw began to tingle and fade to nothingness. "Why didn't it hurt?"

"Oh, there's a little hole in the bone just behind the wisdom tooth - really makes it easy to get the needle in. I don't know why people make such a fuss about injections, do you?"

I didn't answer. I was in a state of shocked wonderment ... all those years? All that trauma I had endured? All to avoid a little pinprick like that?

"Okay, the novocaine should be working now. Did you feel that? Or that?"

"O, Amm!"

"Excellent! Now this will just take a moment ... oh, dear!"

I had closed my eyes when she had picked up her stubby forceps from the tray perched over my chest. When I opened them again, I had a clear view of a big lump of cement between their metal jaws. She squeezed the handles; the filling crumbled into my face.

It took her an hour to extract that tooth. Halfway through the operation we had to take a break, after I begged her for a second injection to re-numb my face. The problem was, there was not enough tooth left for her to grasp and wrench out. At one point she suggested I might need an emergency operation to peel the gum away from the bone. After a long consultation with a colleague - two Dentist Monsters in my face! - she finally decided to drill the bastard tooth in half and chisel the roots out of my jaw.

I left Pirbright that day with the two halves of the tooth wrapped in tissue (because: evidence of torture) and a face half-pink half-bruise. At least BDM had the decency to apologise to me as she handed me two of the biggest painkiller tablets I had ever seen and gave me instructions for my next appointment.

I met BDM for the last time about a week later. That appointment was for a couple of fillings in my upper right jaw but, after examining one of the teeth, she decided an extraction would save time and money. I was okay with her proposal because gum injections - well, they held no fear for me anymore.

Except that injections into the upper gum - particularly through the hard palate - hurt like fuck! And the needles are much longer and have a wicked curve to them. At least this time the extraction took less than a second and I was soon outside smoking a ciggie - against explicit instructions - while waiting for my ride back to Keogh Barracks.

"So how's the face doing, Roots? Still sore?"

"Yes, Corporal." For it was Cpl W talking to me in the long corridor that evening, during one of his regular patrols of 3 Section.

"Good bruise! I've got orders for you."

"Corporal?"

"You're to report to the TTO at 1600 tomorrow for interview."

"TTO, Corporal?"

"Technical Training Officer. Probably wants to make you an Officer."

"Corporal!" The whole Officer thing was beginning to really piss me off.

"Well, get on with stuff. If I see tramlines in your creases tomorrow you know I won't be happy."

"Yes, Corporal," I agreed, not moving until the man had turned and stepped away from me.

I took a moment to poke the tip of my tongue into the soft scab where once my cement tooth had lived, then ambled back to my room to start working myself up into a State of Terror about this brand new development in my life.

Tues 8 Nov: Day 9

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 5] Marching and wheeling
0905-0945 - [FIN M 2] Insurance and savings
0950-1030 - [FA 1] Aims and principles of first aid
1100-1140 - [DRILL 6] Marching and halting
1145-1225 - [END TRG 1] 2 miles in trg shoes
1345-1425 - [SY 3] RMP lecture
1430-1640 - Webbing and respirator issues
Remarks: Fitting of webbing

I've been stalled for over a week in this writing endeavour, wondering how to best tackle and present what happened to me on Day 9. Alongside the events of Day 11 (and, much later, Day 32), this is the day which - for good or bad - determined the course of my Army career.

And yet the stuff that happened on Day 9, the stuff I said and did, should never have come about. Even to this moment, when I sit at the keyboard typing up my account, I have no idea why I was singled out for such an intervention by the Technical Training Officer. I should never have met the man until sometime in Week 7 (according to the timetable) when everyone else in Home Troop had their interviews with him.

Typically, my fantasy-building mechanisms go into overdrive whenever I think about this meeting. I remember - verbatim! - what he said to me and what I said to him. But it's the *What-Ifs* and *What-Mights* of possible alternative outcomes after the meeting that capture my imagination and stop me from typing.

I can never know, now, what the man's real intentions were, what he had planned out for the next 22 years of my life. Was it his own decision? Was he ordered to do it by someone else? *Why?* - that's the big question that keeps me distracted: why did he even think his idea was a good one?

Of course, if he had talked to me, listened to my objections - done his sodding job right! - I would probably have had a long and (hopefully) satisfying Army career. Yes, I carry most of the blame for fucking up my opportunities, not doing enough to salvage the situation. But the original blame is his.

So. Where to start ...

It was a good day; I remember that. The sun was warm and the winds kind - just enough of a breeze to keep the fluffy clouds rolling across a mostly blue sky. Drill was fun; PT was in fact a trot through the countryside in trainers. If I fell asleep during class, I don't recall being called out for it.

The main event of the afternoon was getting our webbing. This is the harness that straps over the uniform-of-the-day, and all the associated bags and pouches that hang from it.

"Don't take anything new," Dave the Para had warned us while we queued up outside the QM Block waiting our turns.

"Why not?" asked Carl.

"New webbing - it's too stiff. It'll cut your shoulders to shreds. If you get the chance grab the used stuff. Easy on your shoulders; better for camouflage."

The webbing I ended up with had several former owners' names and numbers marked in permanent felt tip on straps and stuff. It was as shabby as all shit, but Dave was a Bloke With A Fucking Clue and I wasn't going to ignore him on this sort of thing.

We also got given other stuff, useful stuff we could take into the woods while hunting for man-eating rabbits. Square pans for cooking food; a poncho which we could learn to turn into a tent. Four bungee cords.

The bungee cords were essential because the other major items issued to us were our NBC gear, which had to be carried at all times when on operations and had the added benefit of being bulky and fucking heavy.

The standard issue rubber gas masks were fun - for the first ten minutes at least, after which they became sweaty and annoying. Turns out you can't wear glasses under a rubber gas mask which, given my acute short-sightedness, made navigating in the thing a bugger.

The QM Staff Sergeant was understanding: "You'll only have to put up with that for a few weeks. Once your prescription lenses come in we'll swap them over. Then you'll have no excuse for fucking up!"

We were under strict instructions that day not to touch our gas masks. They were stowed in their own, complicated bag (to be hung on the front of the webbing belt, for easy access) alongside those things that go with a gas mask such as filters, wipes and epipens - all of which we would learn about over the next few weeks. Of course as soon as we were back in the Accommodation Block everyone was running around in their gas masks. Except me.

The NBC suit - we never called it that. It was a Noddy Suit. Big, bulky - probably about as effective as a chocolate teapot for defeating a real nuclear, biological or chemical attack. To fit it to the back of the webbing it had to be rolled as tightly as possible then clipped into position with bungee cords.

We were all outside learning this procedure, daring to step on a corner of the Parade Ground and litter our new kit across it, when the shout came.

"Roots!"

"Yes, Corporal?"

"Why are you still here?"

I thought about the rhetorical question for a moment, prepared for a non-committal answer along the lines of 'Corporal!', when a shiver of remembrance leaked out from my adrenals. I checked my watch: 1625 - wasn't I supposed to be somewhere?

"Permission to attend interview with the TTO, Corporal?"

"You're late, idiot! Leave your kit here and move your fucking arse!"

I moved my arse: "Not in that direction, Roots! THAT building - I'm fucking POINTING at it! - Finally he gets it. RUN!"

The building was old fashioned. The Colonel's office was on the first floor, so I had to take the steps three-at-a-time to clatter my way to his door.

"You Roots?" said a man sat behind a desk in a small office lined with files and boxes.

"You're late! Well don't just stand there - yes, close the door!"

I stood to attention in front of the desk: "2-4-?-?-?-?-ZERO-PRIVATE-ROOTS-ARRR-JAY, SIR!"

"No need to scream in my face! At Ease!"

I eased.

"You know what this meeting is about, Private?"

"No, Sir."

"Hmm. My job is to fit soldiers to the most suitable trade for them. We need people with the right skills to be doing the right job. You understand?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good. I've been through your papers -" at which point the man, whom I can only describe as a sort of archetypal Colonel running to fat, tapped on a file to one side of the desk

"- and I think you have excellent prospects! We are in desperate need of radiographers, and you look a good fit for that role."

"Radiographer, Sir?"

"Yes, Roots. Radiographer."

"I'm going to be a Combat Medical Technician, Sir. That's what I joined as."

"I need to find radiographers. Why are you selling yourself short?"

"I was hoping to be an Environmental Health Technician, Sir."

"We've got too many drain sniffers ..."

"Which is why I'm happy to be a CMT until the next EHT course runs in a couple of years time ..."

"Don't be stupid! You're far too good to be a CMT - utter waste of resource!"

... *The fuck?*

"No. You'll be a radiographer," the fat man with a red face poking from an over-tight uniform continued. "We'll send you off to college for two years to study - no need for uniforms or saluting, it's a proper college mixing with civilian students - and we'll fast-track your promotion to Sergeant by the time you qualify!"

At this point, my guts froze. College. Students. He wanted to send me away for two fucking years to study some shit I had barely heard of before - for what? To take photos of bones?

He wanted to take away my uniform?

"I've been to college already, Sir. I'm a qualified lab technician. You can drop me into a lab and set me to work ..."

"The Army trains its own lab technicians. I've arranged an interview for you in Woolwich on Monday ..."

"... straight away, Sir ... Interview?"

"Be at the main gate at 0900 sharp Monday to pick up your transport. Wear civilian clothes. Everything has been arranged!"

"0900 Monday, Sir. But ..."

"Dismissed!"

The 'interview' took less than five minutes. I have no idea how long it took me to find my way out of the building and back to the Parade Ground. When I got there, the tarmac was devoid of Home Troop - and no sign of my kit.

The webbing was by the side of my bed by the time I reached my room. We all still had work to do - learning how to stow the webbing in the Display Locker tidily enough to pass Inspection the next day. As ever, I checked how Dave the Para was setting out his gear, and copied it.

The room was ... weird. I hadn't told Carl or the Daves about my interview the night before (because: if you ignore it, it will go away) and we were too busy stowing kit then rushing to the Mess for them to properly interrogate me now.

Cpl W caught up with me soon after dinner, in the long corridor.

"How did it go? Are you gonna be an Officer?"

"... Radiographer, Corporal."

"You what?" The look on his face was - nonplussed?

"... I'm gonna be a radiographer, Corporal." And then I wandered away (not asking for permission to continue!) and went downstairs to share some nicotine with the the first knots of cold rage threading themselves into my guts.

I had good reason to be angry.

When I started work at Portex, I quickly discovered I didn't much enjoy the whole employment thing. And, deep in my heart, I still wanted to be the first person in my family to make it to University.

So after a few months of not-enjoying-work I did something about it. I applied to colleges and managed to land two 'unconditional' offers to study for a degree. Cardiff Uni even said I could skip the first year, meaning I'd have my hands on the qualification in two years instead of the normal three.

Of course I accepted their very generous offer!

Back in the 1980s, going to college was, essentially, free - no tuition fees or student loans to worry about in those days. All I needed was a two year grant from Kent County Council to cover rent, food and textbooks.

... Except my County Council were (and still are) one of the most reactionary, illiberal and tight fisted outfits in the country. I asked for the grant; they told me to piss off. I

appealed; they finally agreed to finance me for the final year. I'd have to find the first year's money from other sources.

I tried applying for bursaries, grants, sugar-daddies - the lot. Writing to strangers begging for cash is a horrid, humiliating experience - one that I've never repeated since. Nobody saw the potential to invest in me. Bastards.

Fuck 'em, I thought. *I'll save the money!* I wrote to the University and asked them to defer my place for a year - which they were very happy to do. I got on with the business of not spending any money on anything except the essentials.

... And life went on.

By May 1988, it was clear that I hadn't managed to save enough cash - lab technician work, particularly for a company that viewed such jobs as 'women's work', paid shit wages.

Which is (possibly) why the Army Careers Information Office recruiters found it so easy to persuade me to enlist? They promised me a 20% increase in wages and a guaranteed path to progress my skills and career; all I had to do was give up my - unobtainable - degree-oriented life-plan and sign on the dotted line.

... And then the TTO fucked me over, telling me I was being sent to college for two years to study some shit with no sodding degree at the end of it which would lead to a dead-end job trapped in the arse end of a hospital and ... and 'everything had been arranged'?

By the time the shock of the interview had worn off, and the now-clear stupidity of my life-changing decision had sunk in, I was ready to detonate!

Anyways, between bouts of people running around in their new gas masks, we had barrack duties to complete. I went through the motions, concentrating on ironing and polishing and buffing without paying much attention to the conversations going on beyond the limits of my rage.

"... So why would anyone want to PVR?" Carl was asking.

"Huh?" I responded.

"Everyone's worked so hard to get here. Why would they just bin all that effort?"

I shrugged my shoulders. One of the Dave's said: "Some people can't take it. Ain't what they thought it would be."

"Some people don't belong here ..."

"Some are too thick to get the fucking message!" A few days earlier Cpl W had got on his knees in front of Alcohol Breath Lad and, hands clasped in supplication, begged the man to PVR.

"What do you think, Rik?"

"Mmm," I said, as my inner voice suddenly stopped its pity-fuelled tantrum and fell silent. I let go of the boot in my hand, let it drop to the floor. "Need a piss," I announced, standing up from the bed and heading to the door.

It took me a couple of minutes to track Cpl W down. I waited until he came out of whatever room he had been investigating: "Can I have a word, Corporal?"

"Yeah?"

"... I want to PVR."

"... Why?"

... The fuck? I needed a reason?

"Um ... I'm not happy with the Army way of life, Corporal." It was the only excuse I could come up with at such short notice. But as soon as I said it, I knew it was true.

I'm trying to remember the look on the Corporal's face at this point. I want to say 'surprised', but then I think that's just my fantasy trying to flatter me into the Hero/Victim role in this scene ... nah. I can't remember his reaction, only his words.

"Are you sure about this, Roots?"

"Yes, Corporal! I want to PVR. I don't want to be here anymore!"

... And it was done.

Wed 9 Nov: Day 10

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 7] Numbering and sizing
0905-0945 - [ED 4] The Standing Army
0950-1030 - [ED 5] Army org
1100-1140 - [DRILL 8] Revision 1-7
1145-1225 - [PT 3]
1345-1425 - [ED 6] RAMC org
1430-1555 - [FA 2] Improvised casualty handling & treatment
1600-1640 - [ED 7] Aims of NATO
Remarks: Pay Parade (10:30)

Day 10: a day heavy on classroom stuff learning what the British Army was all about, what purpose it served, and how it fitted into the wider world. As lessons went, these were better than average ... but no longer relevant to me.

Today was supposed to be the day I stopped this nonsense and started being a person again. I woke up not knowing what adventures the day would have to offer me yet, for the first time since arriving, not worrying about it. Whatever was to happen to me, would happen.

... It didn't happen.

"I've PVRd," I told Carl soon after dinner.

"Why?"

"I'm not going to fucking college for two more years. I won't do it. I'm better off out!"

"What the fuck are you talking about college for?"

I thought I had told my roommates what was going on. Apparently not - all the conversations I had been having with people during the day - trying to explain why I had done what I had done - had been taking place in my own head.

I told them about my interview with the TTO, tried to explain my feelings about the outcome to them.

"So you told Cpl W all this?" asked Dave the Para.

"Not really ..."

"You gonna? Maybe they can do something about it."

"It's a bit late now. I've PVRd."

"Fucking idiot! Anyways, never too late. You're still here, yeah?"

"Fucking idiot," agreed Carl and Other Dave.

I didn't expect their reaction to my news. Part of me expected them to be happy to see the back of me - our teamwork as a room hadn't been the most outstanding in the Section, mostly because I can be a lazy bugger at times. But then I hadn't been expecting to hear their reactions in the first place, because I didn't think I'd still be there.

At that point in time, my entire expectation of PVR was based on the BBC TV series *The Paras*, which I had watched some five years earlier back in 1983. In that series anyone who PVRd seemed to be out of the gates and gone within a day of requesting it. The series had also given me the impression that people who PVRd were considered to be scum - for wasting everyone's time and money, as well as taking the place of a recruit who would have been more eager, more hungry, for the opportunities they were being offered.

And I did feel like scum for asking to leave. I liked my roommates - even if Dave the Para was getting into the habit of throwing boots at my head at 0300 (because, apparently: snoring). There was lots about the Army that still scared me, but I had also made some astonishing discoveries about myself over the past 10 days - marching and Drill, for instance, were not as horrid as I had thought they would be.

... But this decision, to PVR - it felt, in my head, like the right thing to do. I wasn't willing to tolerate the lie I had been fed by the recruiters, to bin 5 years of hard work learning a trade (Lab Technician) just to piss off back to college to start learning a second trade (Radiographer) that, to me, sounded as boring as fuck. If feeling like a failure, like scum, was the price to pay then I'd happily cash it.

If I still wanted some Army action in my life, I had decided, I could always join the Territorials ...

Thurs 10 Nov: Day 11

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 9] Revision 1-7
0905-1130 - Laws of armed conflict
1100-1140 - [DRILL 10] Dismiss and Fall out
1145-1225 - [PT 4]
1345-1425 - [ED 8] The Warsaw Pact
1430-1510 - Laws of armed conflict test
1515-1555 - [ED 9] Role of the soldier
1600-1640 - [ED 10] Revision
Remarks: HEAF test (10:30)

Meet the Gang of Four. First up: Newcastle Lad - young, tallish, quite skinny, glasses, quite a long black crew cut, broad accent, a bit quiet. Next: Blond Flat-top Lad - probably older than he looked (which was about 15), quite smiley, not too many zits, hair so fair it looked bleached, not what I would call chatty.

The third member of the Gang I've already introduced - Edinburgh Guy! The fact that he was among our number made me - the last of our quartet - a lot happier about my decision. Though I was surprised that he had decided to PVR because he was definitely A Bloke With A Fucking Clue who had served in the TA before coming to Keogh and had a tattoo of the Corps crest on his bicep. Homesick for the girlfriend, he admitted to me later.

We became the Gang of Four at around 0930 that morning, when an NCO turned up at the classroom, called out our names and told us to jacket up and follow him. Our march to the Admin Block was short; soon enough we were up the stairs and lined at ease along the corridor outside a row of offices, backs to the wall.

None of us had been here before. None of us knew what we were supposed to do. Another NCO instructed us on actions to take when we met the Commanding Officer - open door, step in, stop and don't salute, march forward, scream number-rank-name at the poor man. It seemed simple enough, but I was beginning to get a bit nervous.

We were processed in alphabetical order. My fellow Gang members all lived on the ground floor in the Accommodation Block, thus had surnames above mine in the alphabet, leaving me to be dealt with last. I didn't get to hear what they said to Major M; as each entered, the CO's door seemed to close behind them as if by magic.

"Roots!"

Door - step - stop - march - stop - stamp foot.

"2-4-?-?-?-?-zero-private-roots-arr-jay, SIR!"

"I understand you've requested a PVR, Private Roots."

"Yes, Sir!"

"And the reason for this is because?"

"Not happy with the Army way of life, Sir!"

"Unhappy? Is there any particular reason why you're not happy?"

"Don't want to be here, Sir!"

"And you're certain of this?"

"Yes, Sir!"

... Or something along those lines. Unlike my 'interview' with the TTO, I can't recall with any clarity the conversation I had with the Major. I do remember that I deliberately chose not to follow Dave's advice: tell them what had happened and why I didn't want to be a radiographer. At that moment all I wanted was a simple, clean break - an end to this mad nightmare.

The interview didn't take long. Soon enough I was back in the corridor lined up with the rest of the Gang of Four, where we waited at-ease. In my head I felt kinda floaty, because *It Was Done*. A grand adventure to tell the grandkids one day.

We waited a bit more. I exchanged glances with EG, stood next to me, who had a tiny frown on his brow. I think a couple of faceless NCOs wandered down the corridor as we waited some more.

The door opened again and an NCO with quite a few stripes on his arm ordered us all to march back into the office where we stood in a row in front of the desk. Major M was standing behind his desk, immaculately dressed in his uniform with his Officer's cap on his head, to mark the Formality of what was to come.

"I've decided," he announced, "not to process these PVR requests at this time."

... *The fuck!*

"These soldiers," he continued, "are to remain with their Troop, in training, until further notice."

... *The FUCK!?*

"Carry on!"

... *Oh, shit?*

I can't explain why I heard a { { CRACK } } inside my skull while Major M made his pronouncement. Maybe a small embolism. Possibly a ghost of a dead recruit slamming through my eardrum. The sound of defiance defeated?

It was very **LOUD** - I can still hear it today! But I knew, instinctively, that only I could hear it.

I like to think of it as the psychic sonic boom that slew my terror ...

... Yeah. Too melodramatic. But from that point onwards I stopped worrying so much about everything, stopped worrying about the future and started enjoying the moment I was in.

A good life-lesson, as it turned out.

The rest of the day ... I can't remember it. I can remember Dismiss and Fall Out, but not the learning of that Drill step. The classroom stuff is long gone from my mind.

Sadly, I don't remember if we - the Gang of Four - had a chance to discuss what had just happened to us. I don't remember how my roommates, or the lads in 3 Section, reacted to seeing us march back into the classroom. I have - nothing.

I will never understand the Why of our Commanding Officer's decision that day, but at least today - thanks to the wonders of Google - I can understand the How of it. The contract I signed in 1988 was clear on PVR during basic training: a soldier had the right to PVR (at almost no cost to them) between Weeks 8 and 13 of starting their basic training. Release before Week 8 was entirely within the gift of the CO.

I assume Major M decided that the four soldiers stood before him that day had potential (Edinburgh Guy certainly did) and maybe, with a few more weeks experience under their belts, would come to see their PVR requests as a mistake?

... If yes, then - oh! - you were so, so close to being right, Major M, for one of those soldiers at least!

Ceasefire

My happiest times in the Army were when I was moving. My favourite place in Keogh Barracks was the PT Block.

I liked the PT Staff Sergeant partly because he was super-fit and handsome (in a G Thing 'my type' kind of way) and clean shaven (so, so many moustaches in the Army!), but mainly because the tasks he ordered us to perform were challenging and fun.

"Were you watching, Roots? Grab the rope with both hands - now wrap it round the heel of one foot and stand on it with the other - okay, good. Haul your legs up and let the rope slide through your feet - knees up to your chest - stand on the rope again - and straighten - reach up with your hands and grasp again - you're doing good - all the way to the top ..."

... And half a dozen inchworm manoeuvres later there I was, right at the top of the long rope, looking down on the distant activity far below me. I panicked a little when I inspected the metal thing hooking the rope to the climbing frame beam - it seemed so flimsy! - but a couple of slow breaths out quickly dispelled the fear.

Heights, it turned out, could be fun - as long as I had a firm grip on something and knew what the fuck I was doing.

"Roots! Come back down!"

"Staff!" I shouted, then gazed down into the man's upturned face and gave him a big smile.

Everything I did in the gym, I did with a smile. I couldn't help it. The place made me happy! Crab football match? Big smile! Push everyone else out of the big circle? I performed that task with a grin that didn't leave my face even after I lost (I was fourth last left in the ring, and the others had to gang up on me to shift me out).

We did gymnastics in the gym - if you can call forward rolls and the most basic of handsprings over the vault 'gymnastics'. I hadn't done that sport since Dymchurch Primary (because: only girls did gymnastics at Southlands; boys had to play football instead) and the fun of rediscovering dizzy achievements was exhilarating.

Circuit training - people who don't enjoy circuit training don't understand the purpose of being alive!

Of course PT had a military purpose beyond bringing our fitness levels up to the required standards. It was in the gym that we all learned to cross ground in various ways: monkey run; leopard crawl; ghost walk; cat walk; kitten crawl - skills to be practiced later in the woods around the Barracks as we battled the man-eating rabbits.

Still, my favourite activity was running. Sprinting in particular but, as the weeks passed, my endurance levels improved to the point where the thought of doing a 3 mile run in full kit carrying a stretcher didn't faze me. Sometimes I had to stop myself laughing out loud as we started a run, before the double breathing kicked in and I hit my stride.

During PT sessions I was at my most competitive. There were some other lads in the Troop just as fit as me, a few who could beat me with ease in the longer runs, but if it involved sprinting then no bastard was gonna best me ...

I fucking miss that place!

Fri 11 Nov: Day 12

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0945 - Swimming test
0950-1030 - [ED 11] Test
1100-1140 - [FIN M 3] Advice on hire purchase
1145-1225 - [PT 5]
1345-1510 - [FA 3] Clearing an obstructed airway & dealing with unconscious casualty
1515-1640 - [FC 1] Personal camouflage

Of the many (many!) phobias I collected as a kid, only one has remained with me through my adult years. Water. More specifically, water on my face.

Nope - I have no idea why either. When asked about it, I joke about how the Vicar tried to drown me in the church font during my christening though, given my relationship with the Church of England, I'm surprised the doors didn't blow off their hinges on that day.

The two key outcomes of this phobia are: 1. I limit my showers to once a week (a perfectly sufficient amount of body washing in my view); and 2. I can't swim.

Well, I can swim. I can stay afloat for a couple of minutes, and I can doggy paddle my way to the nearest point of safety (within 5 metres). But proper swimming - without the aid of a swimming board or inflatable ring - remains my Last Great Challenge.

Many people have tried to teach me to swim. All attempts have foundered on that stupid, simple fact: I loathe the feel of water on my face.

Saddest of all is that from the first moment I saw Jacques Cousteau on the telly, I've wanted to be a deep sea diver. The idea of exploring coral reefs and discovering sunken treasure - big childhood fantasies for me.

I'm telling you all this, dear reader, because Day 12 was the Swimming Test day.

"Corporal?"

"What the fuck now, Roots?"

"I can't swim!"

0720 was becoming my favourite time of day to let Cpl W know news like this. He, too, was learning not to get upset by whatever I told him just before Stand By Your Beds.

"Tell the Sergeant when you get on the coach. If you're stupid enough to drown during the test, he can jump in to save you. Now fuck off!"

Inspection came and went. We all bundled out of our rooms into the fresh air and marched smartly to the luxury coach that awaited us. As instructed I told the Sergeant my news as we journeyed to Pirbright.

The coach stopped in front of a low, modern building. Chlorinated air welcomed our nostrils as we walked through the doors and into the changing rooms. Soon enough we were all naked except for our trunks or, for those stupid enough not to have remembered to pack them, underpants.

We were marched in single file to the indoor swimming pool and ordered to stand at ease around its perimeter. Almost 60 young men around a 25m swimming pool makes for a crowded situation.

"On my command," shouted the Sergeant, his voice echoing around the space, "you will jump into the water feet first and move away from the edge no more than a metre. When I blow the whistle, you will swim clockwise around the sides of the pool; to pass the test you must complete one circuit, never touching the sides. At the deep end of the pool you will dive down and retrieve one of the discs placed at the bottom of the pool - failure to complete the test without a disc in your hand will mean you fail the test!"

... I was barely listening. I was in thrall to the water. It happens every time: whenever I encounter a pond, or lake, or swimming pool - any large body of calm liquid - it mesmerises me.

I know what it wants. It wants me - my face, my breath - forever.

I stared into the Blue. The Blue seduced my will as it petrified my flesh

"Step forward to the edge!"

I stepped forward. Somehow - I have no clue how - I managed to raise my rock-heavy right arm. Still I stared into the ripples, and beyond them to the deep, black lines striped across the pool's sloping base.

A whisper in my ear: "Why is your hand in the air, soldier?"

"I can't swim," I whispered back.

"You're not even going to attempt the test?"

I shook my head, my eyes incapable of ripping themselves away from that hell-holy expanse to turn and look at the man behind me.

"And you wait until now to tell anyone you can't swim?"

I had no answer.

"Sod off back to the changing rooms, Roots," whispered Short Shouty Corporal. "You fucking sicken me!"

I stepped back from the edge of the pool, and ran.

The two minute silence at 1100 on 11 November - that is both an old thing and a new thing. Between 1945 and 1995 it wasn't a thing at all - everything to do with Remembrance, including the two minute silence, happened on Remembrance Sunday.

At 1100 on Day 12, 11 November 1988, the only thing that did happen was (probably) the Stubbing Out of the Ciggie before we walked back into the classroom to start the next lesson of the day.

To make up for the morning's watery horror, I was allowed to go play in the woods after lunch.

Fieldcraft lessons very quickly became my second-most favourite activity, after PT and ahead of Drill. This, to me, was what being a soldier was all about and, even though I was born-and-bred rural, I had never got round to doing real rural stuff as a kid. Now I had the chance to become a proper, mud-covered warrior and I wasn't going to waste the opportunity!

During that first lesson, I discovered I wasn't very good at Fieldcraft.

"You're not supposed to put so much mud on your face," said Carl.

"Why not?"

"It says so in the book! Just enough to blend in."

I checked over Carl's face, saw how he had streaked his face and forehead with wiggly finger-widths of crumbly ochre lines. He also had dry fern fronds poking over his shoulders - work I still had to do. I glanced over to see how Dave the Para, working with Other Dave, was doing - but he was merged into the background already.

I took the hint and scraped some of the mudpack from my face, went hunting for bunches of dead leaves to shove between the straps of Carl's webbing.

The task was to camouflage ourselves in woodland attire, then go hide in the bushes while NCOs poked about and tried to spot us. I wasn't the first man spotted that day, but my roommates all lasted longer than me.

I remember having a thought as we marched along the dirt track that evening, heading towards the perimeter gate and the Depot beyond: I was happy. That thought sticks with me because, given the circumstances, I shouldn't have been happy.

But at that moment, surrounded by mates, still covered in mud and leaves - and facing a shitload of work to get my uniform and skin back into an acceptable state for the next morning's Inspection - I felt like I belonged to something bigger and better than me, something good, and it felt ... right. Happy.

Sat 12 Nov: Day 13

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 11] Dressing
0905-1030 - [FA 4] Exhaled air resuscitation (EAR)
1100-1225 - [FA 5] External cardiac compression (ECC)
1345-1640 - [FC 2] Judging distances

By the end of Week 2, Inspection was getting more ... intense.

"Does that sock look happy to you, Soldier? Or those ones?"

"No, Corporal!" Other Dave is not having a good Inspection.

"They look fucking suicidal to me! Do you wanna trust your feet to suicidal socks?"

"No, Corporal!"

"Then try STACKING the fucking things on the fucking shelf so they fucking SMILE at me when I fucking INSPECT them!" Cpl W screamed into poor Dave's ear.

"YES, Corporal!"

Opposite me, Carl is doing everything in his power to keep his mouth from grinning. It's a battle he's lost in the past, and I reckon he's gonna lose again today. Not that I have much sympathy; I'm fighting my own battle with the smiles as LCpl O stands close in front of me, his hands making man-eating bunny shapes in my line of sight.

Smiling during Inspection is not permitted, and I will not permit my mouth to disobey. Failure will lead to invective and push-ups and I'm not in the mood for a beasting today.

Beastings - I was getting used to them; most of us were at that point. So by the end of Week 2 the NCOs were introducing us to other, more fun punishments for various infringements of The Rules.

The first of these was Show Parade. Fuck up something at Inspection - such as an unhappy sock, or a tramline-ironed trouser leg - and the offender would get to repeat Inspection at some point during the day, usually soon after dinner. Sometimes Show Parade would happen stood by your bed, or in the corridor. Other times it would happen outside - though I don't remember any of us having to cart our display lockers, or our beds, or a complete sink unit, downstairs and outside so whoever had ordered the Inspection could recheck our work.

Did I get Show Paraded? I don't remember having to endure the exercise solo, though I have an inkling that we - the room - got done a couple of times for an insufficiently polished corner or a grimy top-of-the-door or whatever.

The other novel punishment introduced at this time is what I think of now as The March Of Shame - which I definitely didn't have to endure, though I probably came close to it a few times. This could happen at any time of the day or evening, often for failing to complete a more important Order or for treating an NCO with a touch too much over-familiarity (example: back-chatting a Corporal) - as Dave the Para discovered one day, with a beetroot-red face, when he least expected it.

The punishment itself was performance art of the highest quality - maybe the NCOs gave awards to each other for the Best MOS of the Week? It started with an impressive volley of abusive screaming into the offender's face, continued as the NCO quick-marched the victim down to the Guardroom with an even louder litany of their faults and failings so everyone in the Depot was aware of how much of a twat this particular soldier was, and concluding in the Guardroom itself as the Guardroom NCOs joined in the fun.

Nobody who suffered the MOS enjoyed it. The thought of having to experience it was probably the main force that kept me working to improve my standards. I did hear rumours

that the NCOs were supposed to treat every recruit to at least one MOS during their basic training - an initiation of sorts I suppose.

Whatever. I never got the pleasure of learning how stupid my mother had been to conceive me in the first place; whenever I fucked up bigtime, I got Charged for it instead.

First Aid lessons were the most fun thing that happened to me in the classroom. For FA lessons we would first watch a demo of the session's activity, then we would clear the ranks of desks and chairs to the edges of the room and try out stuff ourselves.

A lot of this involved bandages and bondage. Whatever injury or wound a fellow soldier had suffered, we were taught, throwing a bandage at it would generally cure the problem until some doctor wandered along to mess up our good work.

I remember quite a lot of these First Aid sessions - lessons that every soldier passing through basic training had to learn; the more advanced, Corps-specific first aid stuff would be taught as part of the obligatory CMT3 course during Weeks 9-15.

Thus FA2 was all about how to build a stretcher from a couple of jackets and a couple of handy broom handles. FA3 taught us the rudiments of how to save a person's life if they started to choke which, given the state of the food served us by the Army Catering Corps, was knowledge as essential for our safety as knowing what to do and where to run during a Fire Alert.

On Day 13 we got to spend most of the morning playing paramedics-and-nurses in the classroom with a set of rubbery-plastic half-man mannikins. For this lesson, we took it in turns to punch our mannikin in the chest and blow air into its mouth.

... Yep. The first man I ever French-kissed was entirely synthetic.

One thing we didn't do was clean out the sadly deceased's mouth before we pinched his nose and attempted to resuscitate him; over the next few days Home Troop suffered its own plague of flu-like colds - a Revenge of the Dummies, I reckon, for the abuse we heaped upon them during that lesson. Sharing is caring, as they say.

Sun 13 Nov: Day 14

0820-0900 - [Inspection] TP staff
0905-1225 - Remembrance Day service and parade
1345-1425 - [FA 6] Recognition / treatment of shock
1430-1510 - [FA 7] Stopping bleeding / dressing wounds

1515-1555 - [FA 8] Causes & recognition of fractures
1600-1640 - [FA 9] Splinting an injured leg

Back in the 1980s Remembrance Sunday was the one day of the year when seeing soldiers and other servicemen (and women) in uniform in High Streets across Britain was both normal and expected. Not just because there were many veterans from both World Wars keen to remember their friends and family members who had died or been wounded during those conflicts, but also because of the ongoing Cold War and the Troubles.

We all lived on edge in those dangerous times, when the chance of being caught up in an IRA atrocity - while remote - was ever-present. As was the existential threat of Nuclear Armageddon, which had underlain my life since birth and which I had marched against while at college.

I learned in 1988 that behind the high barbed-wire fences of every military Barracks and Camp the Remembrance Day Service and Parade was an event marked with full and exceptional pomp and dignity. This was no longer an event forced on kids by old folks swapping war stories over their ales; this was about us soldiers, our job, the awful realities that we had voluntarily signed up to deal with - should the need arise, as it had just six years before in the Falklands, as it still did at that time on the streets of Northern Ireland.

Which doesn't even begin to explain why the Troop NCOs decided to stick a white choirboy dress thing over my uniform and make me sing in church.

I know the reason they gave us was because they only had 6 surplines and they were all a bit on the small side which was why the duty of being a choirboy for the church service fell to the six shortest recruits in Home Troop.

Carl and I weren't the shortest short-arses in the Troop. That honour went to Pte B, an Army brat whose Dad was a Warrant Officer still serving in the Corps. Which meant that Pte B was on everybody's radar from Day 1 Minute 1 (most of the NCOs knew, or knew of, his Dad) and, having lived on or near Army bases his entire life, he had no excuse whatsoever to fuck up his basic training. Which was no problem for Pte B, who had Fucking Clues in abundance and was probably a more natural-born squaddie than even Dave the Para.

Six of us were singled out as soon as the Troop reached the old church which stood near to the museum in the Depot, and marched off to a side-door while the others had to stand to attention in front of the big doors as various people stepped around and saluted flags and stuff.

The surplices were indeed white, and frilly. They reached down to below our knees - in Pte B's case almost touching his ankles - leaving only our boots in their shiniest Sunday-best glint to give any hint to people that the young men wearing them were, in fact, soldiers.

The Chaplain - a genial older man dressed that day in his proper uniform of Christian threads and amulets - checked us over. "You'll have to do, I suppose," he told us. "Now go sit in the choir stalls closest to the altar and watch for my hand signals telling you when to stand up and sit back down. And do try to do it together, please? It would be nice if you could impress the congregation!"

So there we were, almost cherubic in our frilly white surplices with our mightily polished steel-tipped boots poking out from under the hem, sat in the choir stalls in front of the crowd. I was enjoying the experience as we had a good view of the architecture; I've always found pleasure from nosing around old buildings, wondering if I've walked over those floors before in a previous life.

Rather than watch for hand signals, I copied Carl. When he stood, I stood, etc. The service started with a hymn that I had never heard before so I dutifully mimed along, glad that I was mostly hidden from the people packed into the pews. There were some readings, some sermons - the usual churchy stuff. I let my mind wander.

I noticed Carl ruffling through his hymn book, and copied him. This page displayed a hymn I did know - one I had sung many, many times in school assembly. My day brightened: no more mumbling for Rik!

Now, for reasons which I still consider to be discriminatory, I was never allowed to perform in school plays and the closest I ever came to a musical career was smacking a bouncy stick onto a glockenspiel in the school band.

But when the music takes me, I don't care for critics. I knew exactly what I had to do. As organ music swirled opening chords around us I filled my lungs, widened my jaws ... and volleyed the Words of God's Song into the stone walls and wooden beams around me!

... Someone once - maliciously! - compared my singing voice to that of a performing seal. The Bastard!

To his credit the Chaplain didn't cry - though, after the service completed, his eyes certainly moistened alongside his grimace as he took the surplice from me. "Good job, men," he mumbled, before waving us out of the side door and shuffling away, like a shell-shocked Tommy, to find comfort in the last of the blessed Blood of Christ.

Mon 14 Nov: Day 15

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 12] Open and close order
0905-1030 - [FC 3] Target indication
1100-1140 - [DRILL 13] Salute
1145-1225 - [PT 6]
1345-1510 - [FC 4] Fire control orders
1515-1555 - [FA 10] Supporting an arm
1600-1640 - [FA 11] Treatment of burns

If you have managed to reach this point of the narrative - well done! You both deserve medals - especially if you have been making notes and realise already that this was the day I was supposed to have my interview in Woolwich about becoming a radiographer.

... I didn't have my interview.

I have no idea if the transport the TTO Colonel had booked for me turned up at the main gates at 0900, or if the interviewer(s) gathered together in London only to be disappointed by my non-appearance. I don't remember worrying about the consequences of not showing up because, in my mind, the thing was irrelevant: even though I was still in basic training, I knew that soon enough I would no longer be a soldier.

Anyways. Day 15 was important to me because this was the day I learned to salute. You can't call yourself a soldier - or even a temporary soldier - until you know the mechanics of a proper, British Army salute.

Unlike marching, or Drill, or even calling Officers 'Sir' or 'Ma'am', saluting people was something that never sat easy with me. I didn't enjoy having to do it.

From Day 15 onwards we had to salute Officers: during Inspection; when on Dress Parade; when collecting our cash at Pay Parade; and any other time we walked into a space containing an Officer. After learning how to Salute on the March things got even worse as from that moment we had to salute Officers whenever we walked or marched past them which, in Keogh Barracks, was way too often: the place was fucking littered with Officers with no obvious purpose or role beyond returning our salutes.

The only person I enjoyed saluting was Cpl W's wife, whom we occasionally encountered as she wheeled her baby around the Depot on various errands. We weren't supposed to salute her (because: civilian) but Cpl W asked us to do it and, as we quite liked him, we humoured him on this.

A couple of weeks after learning to Salute on the March one of my mates told me that we didn't have to salute an Officer if we were jogging or running when we passed him (or her).

On hearing that nugget of intel, I stopped walking: everywhere I went - even from my room to the toilet - I jogged or ran or jumped there. The effort kept me both fit, and happy.

This memory is not date-specific, but it involved Alcohol Breath Lad so I'll stick it here for safe keeping. It is a memory that I call *The Mystery of the Dribbly White Line*.

It started while I was ironing my wooly shirts. The four of us were busy at barrack routine stuff, chewing the latest gossip, when screaming erupted in the long corridor.

"3 SECTION! Get your fucking ARSES into the fucking corridor NOW!"

We were becoming good at responding to unexpected screaming. Everyone dropped what they were doing - I remembered to unplug the iron (Mum had taught me well) - and shifted arses to the designated place.

"Space yourselves along the wall - why the FUCK are you not standing to ATTENTION? You people are a fucking SHOWER OF SHIT!"

The man generating the noise turned out to be the Troop Sergeant, who was a natural at the Screaming Thing - he could run the Screaming Skull himself to a close second on the Parade Ground. In the confines of the long corridor his bellow echoed to almost painful levels. The fact that he was here among us, at full volume, during the evening's barrack routine was a worrying turn of events.

General shouting continued for a couple of minutes. I stared straight ahead, not daring to twist my eyes in their sockets. I realised Cpl W and LCpl O were also in attendance only when they stamped into my line of sight, eyeballed me for a couple of seconds each, and moved on to the next soldier in line.

Whatever the problem was, it was beginning to get more serious. I checked my memories of the day, trying to work out if anything I had done might have triggered this tsunami of noise.

"ONE of you CUNTS has been WANKING! In the TOILET!"

I let my shoulders ease down by a couple of millimetres. This was definitely not my fault: I hadn't had a stiffie since the day I had arrived - even my bladder-driven morning wood had deserted me.

"This evening Cpl W, while checking over the toilet block, discovered a line of spunk - FUCKING SPUNK! - dribbling down the inside of one of the toilet doors. SPUNK! Now LISTEN UP!"

I knew better than to laugh at the Sergeant's outrage. I was actually surprised that anyone in the Section would have the energy to jerk one off after a full day's training.

"The TOILETS are there for you to PISS in, to SHIT in!" the Sergeant explained. "They have NOT been provided as WANKING STOOLS! I want the DISGUSTING BASTARD who is RESPONSIBLE for this ACT of fucking BARBARITY to step forward NOW!"

... Of course, nobody stepped forward.

As if choreographed, Cpl W took over screaming duties for the next few minutes. Then LCpl O had his turn before returning the shouty baton to the Sergeant. I can't remember the words they screamed, though the gist of it was that masturbation was an activity that was absolutely forbidden to all soldiers when they were on Active Duty and that we, as recruits in basic training, were on Active Duty 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Also: vile habit. Also: disrespectful to our fellow recruits. Also: who the fuck would be stupid enough to not clean up the evidence of their crime after committing it?

Again, and again, the demand was made for the culprit to step forward and take responsibility for their sexual depravity.

... Of course, nobody stepped forward.

Stage 2 was the individual questioning. Corporals and Sergeant distributed themselves along the line of recruits and demanded to know if they were responsible.

"Was it you, Roots?" demanded Cpl W, his nose no more than an inch from mine.

"NO, Corporal!"

"Are you lying to me, Roots?"

"NO, Corporal!"

"Do you know who did it?"

"NO, Corporal!"

"Are you even capable of masturbation, Roots?"

"NO, Corporal!"

... Nobody admitted to the crime.

Then came Stage 3: the silent contemplation.

"You will stand here in this corridor," shouted the Sergeant, "at Attention, until the perpetrator steps forward! The SOONER this happens, the sooner everyone else can return to their barrack routine! If NOBODY has stepped forward by Lights Out, you shall all continue to stand here, at attention! Do you FUCKERS understand me? You will be here ALL FUCKING NIGHT and ALL DAY TOMORROW if that is what it takes to get the BASTARD who wanked on the door to OWN the fuck UP!"

The silence that followed was bliss. I took the opportunity to switch off my thoughts and stare with eyes just-out-of-focus at the wall opposite - the key that unlocked the special I-Fear-No-Pain place in my head. I barely noticed when the cycle repeated, answering the questions screamed in my face by LCpl O in rote "NO, Corporal!" fashion.

We Stood at Attention for almost an hour. In the end ABL cracked, screaming "It wasn't me! I didn't do it!" into the silence which, as far as the NCOs were concerned, was the closest they were going to get to a confession that night.

... Was he guilty?

"Who knows," I shrugged, when Carl asked me as we took our last smoke of the evening. "I just wish the bastard would get the message and fuck off!"

"Like you?"

"Nah. Not even he could fuck up a PVR like me ..."

Tues 15 Nov: Day 16

0745-0815 - [Inspection] SSM/RSM
0820-0900 - [DRILL 14] Salute on the march
0905-1030 - [NBC 1] The threat and intro to IPE
1100-1140 - [DRILL 15] Salute on the march
1145-1225 - [PT 7]
1345-1425 - [FA 12] Dealing with an unconscious casualty
1430-1510 - [FA 13] Recognition & treatment abdo injury
1515-1555 - [NBC 2] IPE identification
1600-1640 - TP Comds disposal

Day 16 - a lost day, apart from the Salute on the March thing. I think 'dealing with an unconscious casualty' was where we practiced putting each other into the recovery position? If yes, then the lesson has proved to be productive and useful over the decades, in particular for dealing with hopelessly drunk trade at 4 in the morning after it has passed out on the bed.

I have two very specific and vivid images relating to an SSM/RSM Inspection. Neither took place on this, our first formal bedroom encounter with the Screaming Skull. Given that it was a novel situation I'm surprised by my lack of memories about it - but Inspection was Inspection: the mechanics of the event didn't change much, whoever was marking my efforts out of 10.

I had to look up the acronym 'IPE' on Google. I doubt I could identify many Individual Protective Equipment items today, apart from the Noddy Suit itself, the gasmask, and the thick rubber gloves - the pervy, fetish bits of the gear, if you like.

'Salute on the March' brings back several memories involving feedback on the state of our marching. Every now and again, as we lined up in ranks in front of the Accommodation Block either at the start or the end of the day, one of the NCOs would make a general announcement.

"There has been a complaint made to the Commanding Officer about the state of your marching!" the NCO would shout. "It is shit! Your failure to keep in-step with each other is a fucking joke! It brings shame on you, and on us, your NCOs! People are saying that we are incapable of teaching you twats how to march! If there is no improvement tomorrow, I will make it my Command Task to hurt you until fucking blood squirts from your fucking ears! Do you understand me?"

"YES, CORPORAL!" - or Sergeant, or whoever was making the threat.

I believed then, as I still believe now, that nobody ever complained about the state of our marching. I mean, why bother? And I have no idea what desired effect these warnings were supposed to have on us; I do know they went straight over my head because the Fucking Up The Marching thing was never my problem. Were we supposed to give ourselves extra practice during fag breaks? Encourage the weaker marchers to do better somehow?

... Whatever.

I could be wrong, but I reckon these little messages were all timetabled - everything about our basic training was choreographed, often to the minute. I justify my belief by the fact that after a few weeks the NCOs lined us up outside the accommodation block to announce that the CO had received a compliment - well, blow me over! - from an unknown observer about how good our marching had been that day. After which, we heard nothing more.

Wed 16 Nov: Day 17

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 16] Revision 1-15
0905-1030 - No 2 Dress Parade
1100-1140 - [DRILL 17] Revision 1-15
1145-1225 - [END TRG 2] 2 miles in trg shoes
1345-1425 - Read HEAF
1430 onwards - [FA 14] First aid test

Was it ever possible for me to have too much of a good Drill thing? I discovered on Day 17 that my Drill enjoyment limit was about 3 hours.

No 2 Dress Parade was where we demonstrated our marching and Drill skills in front of the Troop Commander. Before that, a bout of practice. Then the inspection itself where we did our line-dancing stuff and spent ages stood to attention, ease, attention, etc and got individual critiques of our impressively ironed and polished uniforms and boots from the TC.

The final bout of Drill, after the TC had sneered his way off the Parade Ground, was for us to practice the bits we got wrong. My memory here is of us having to practice our Salutes on the March, which some twat or other kept fucking up. All I wanted at that point was a smoke because I hadn't had a fag since before breakfast and no mortal squaddie (me) can survive an entire morning on just a single fix of nicotine.

The endurance training run after so much Drill was a fucking relief!

The timetable gave us five minutes between sessions. If the sessions were taking place at opposite ends of the Depot then we'd have to dash between them. If they were closer, like on Day 17 when we had to move from the Parade Ground at the front of the Accommodation Blocks to the PT Block, conveniently passing our wing so we could pop inside to retrieve the required kit, then we could take risks - such as grabbing a sneaky smoke before reporting for the run.

Red was the required colour vest for this endurance run; I could only find my white one. I think I had lent my red one to a fellow Section-mate to get them out of a crisis, but then promptly forgot who (because: the P Thing) and never saw it again. The same thing happened to my football boots - an act of kindness which came back to haunt me on Day 42.

The PT Staff Sergeant spotted my fuckup almost immediately.

"Are you colourblind, Roots?"

"No, Staff!"

"Then why the fuck are you wearing a different colour vest to everyone else?"

"Lost my red vest, Staff!"

I was getting used to owning up to my mistakes and taking the consequences. So I was a bit surprised when Staff ordered me to follow him into his little office.

"Wear this one," he said, throwing a still-damp-with-his-sweat vest into my face. "I want it back washed and ironed, understand?"

"Yes, Staff!" I was already unzipping my camo jacket to get the wrong garment off my back, stunned by this unexpected turn of good fortune.

That evening I washed and ironed both vests. The PT vests we got issued with were soft-cotton v-neck t-shirt affairs which, after the first washing, turned into fucking nightmares to iron back into shape. My borrowed red vest was almost new, which meant I had to make a special effort with the steam to minimize the damage.

I asked Cpl W, at the normal time the next morning (0720), what I needed to do to get a replacement shirt. "Go see the QM at lunchtime," he told me. "He can shout at you; I really can't be arsed. Now fuck off!"

The QM Staff Sergeant couldn't be arsed to shout at me either; he just took my number and threw a new red vest still in its wrapping in my face which I, in turn, threw into my personal locker - vowing never to lend any bastard anything ever again.

It was a good week before the PT Staff remembered, at the close of another gym session: "Which one of you wankers did I lend my vest to last week?"

"Staff!" I shouted, happy to take responsibility and save my mates from any potential Troop beasting. I moved double-quick to get my face into his line of sight.

"Hah! Roots! I need it back now! If it ain't perfect, you'll know I'll make you pay!"

It wasn't perfect; a week's worth of wear and washing had turned the borrowed vest into a shapeless disaster with mismatched arms and a v-neck hole wider than my hips.

I was about to dash off to collect the ironed mess of cloth, when I remembered: "I got a new vest from the QM - still in its wrapping, Staff. Do you want that one instead?"

He widened his eyes, and nodded. Another thing I was learning was that when I did manage to do something above and beyond expectations, NCOs would widen their eyes and nod. I liked it when I got that reaction. I took his nod as permission to carry on and, within two minutes, the man had a brand new, perfectly shaped vest in his hands.

"Don't ever lose your kit again!" - I suppose it was the best response he had managed to think up in the short time. "Well, get on with stuff then!"

I got on with sprinting to lunch and whatever abomination the Army Catering Corps were planning to inflict on my taste buds that day.

The First Aid test was, for me, a couple of hours waiting at ease in the corridor next to the classroom while everyone in the alphabet before me got tested, followed by 15 minutes of examination, followed by a dash back to the Accommodation Block to share gossip over a well deserved couple of ciggies.

The test itself was four or five stations dotted around the classroom, each manned by an NCO with a clipboard. We did the test in pairs. One of the tests was a log roll / recovery position thing. I'm sure we also had to throw a bandage at our test partner and bondage him with appropriately pretty knots for a variety of injuries.

The first test involved thumping and french kissing my old friend, the half-man mannikin. As I was blowing into the dummy's mouth the NCO with the clipboard - Cpl W, bless him - started making guttural choking noises. I stopped what I was doing and gave him a quizzical look.

"Khhh, khhhhhhh, kh!"

I looked down at the dummy, saw that in my eagerness to get my lips suctioned to its mouth I had rested and pressed my left forearm into its neck.

"Oh!" I said. "Sorry, mate!" I re-positioned my arm, pinched the plastic nose and carried on huffing. When that part of the test concluded, Cpl W awarded me a nod and a tiny hint of a smile.

We all passed the test. We were Royal Army Medical Corps recruits and there was no fucking way our NCOs were going to permit any of us to fail basic First Aid. Killing wounded warriors was the doctors' job, not ours!

Thurs 17 Nov: Day 18

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 18] Side paces
0905-1030 - [NBC 3] Chemical agents / characteristics and effects
1100-1140 - [DRILL 19] Change step
1145-1225 - [BFT 1]
1345-1640 - [FC 5] Crossing ground tactically

Dave the Para introduced the concept of Sick Parade to me, by very kindly going sick the previous day and earning himself the right to spend the entire day in bed. Of course I had to try this new thing so when I woke up with a slight fever on Day 18 I reported it immediately to Cpl W (at 0725). Cpl W, who had training in medical stuff (because: Corporal in the Royal Army Medical Corps), gave me a probing Hard Stare then told me to secure my display locker and piss off downstairs to join the other Sickies.

Sick Parade was getting ourselves marched (or shambled) across to the Medical Block where we had been given many injections on Day 2. I was seen by a Medic and managed to record a temperature of around 38 degrees. Alongside my report of headache and aching joints, it was enough to secure me an Excused From Physical Activities thing.

For both sessions of Drill I got to stand in the wooden shelter next to the Parade Ground. I had a good (quiet) chat with the two Jee Troop veterans who had been back-squadded into Home Troop on medical grounds. One of the lads had broken his leg during basic training and was still on crutches; the other had gone down with glandular fever [infectious mononucleosis, for non-Brits reading this account] and thus had my instant sympathy - I had struggled with that virus for 5 months while at college and knew first-hand how debilitating the disease could be, and how fucking unsympathetic other people could be about it.

I didn't get excused from sitting in the classroom to learn what effects chemical agents could have on a soldier's body. If the images were supposed to shock me - they didn't. I had seen far worse images at college, and spent many pleasant hours examining and testing for the various microbes and parasites that caused those horrors.

Parasites fascinate me: one of my few regrets about leaving the Army is missing the chance to become a paramedic, so I could get an opportunity to meet some of those little buggers (preferably in other people's bodies) in the wild jungles of Belize.

This afternoon's Field Craft lesson was all about putting our camouflage skills, and the stuff we had been learning in the PT block about moving across ground on our hands and toes, into practice. Except for me and the other sickies, who instead got the pleasure of standing around doing fuck all while everyone else had fun.

The exercise was to camouflage up in one part of the woods, then move through the woods unseen - avoiding the man-eating rabbits - towards a small hill bereft of trees where an NCO with a clipboard stood waiting for attacks. When in range, pine cone grenades were to be lobbed at the NCO - the soldier who scored the first direct hit won the game.

I got stood on the hill alongside the NCO with the clipboard. The boredom was intense as the minutes passed and we failed to get blown up.

"You see anything, Roots?"

"No, Corporal."

"Any signs of movement?"

"I can't spot any movement, Corporal."

"Well, don't just stand there like a sodding prick! Run down and see if you can find anyone - when you see someone, put your hand up and point them out to the nearest NCO."

Before he had finished speaking, I was away like a dog let off its leash. Finally, something to fucking do! For the next happy half hour I went dodging up and down paths and tracks, checking for movements and the flash of pale flesh amid the dead brackens. I found a few of the Enemy, too - though sadly no man-eating rabbits.

"I thought you were supposed to be sick?" accused Cpl W at the end of the exercise.

"I was, Corporal," I replied between pants. "But I feel much better now!"

Nobody managed to blow up the NCO on the hill, but we were all in a good mood as we ranked up and started marching back to Barracks along the wide track - remembering to 'break step' as we crossed the rickety metal-and-wood bridge over the railway tracks.

Just past the bridge, we discovered a big muddy puddle. The weather since the start of basic training had alternated between sunny and cloudy, but no rain so far which - for most of us - was a bit of a disappointment as it meant we weren't getting an authentic basic training experience.

"Can we get muddy, Corporal?" asked Dave the Para, who knew what an authentic basic training experience should be like - as he constantly reminded us during barrack routine.

"Can we, Corporal?" joined in everyone else. "Please, Corporal!"

Cpl W, in charge of marching us back to the Depot, lacked the moral certitude to resist our childlike pleas: "3 Section, in single file, kitten crawl through that puddle!"

Everyone crawled, splashed, sploshed and rolled through that puddle, and shouted encouragement to others as their turn came. I was last into the churned morass and surfaced smothered in the dark-grey mud. My uniform was soaked, my webbing slathered in the stuff.

I knew as soon as I stood upright that it was gonna take a huge amount of work to get everything cleaned and dried and fixed for the next Inspection ... but I didn't give a shit. Finally I had been baptised as a soldier!

We marched back through the perimeter fence gate and drew up outside the Accommodation Block to the cheers and jeers of the other Sections. We knew they were jealous; we didn't care.

"WHAT the FUCK is the MEANING of THIS!?"

Silence fell almost instantly across the Troop. Not waiting for the Order, we all stamped to Attention ...

... And then the Screaming Skull detonated!

He shouldn't have been there to see us; he should have been elsewhere, managing Officers or something. But for some reason the man stepped out of the Accommodation Block to witness the arrival of Swamp Monster Section.

Not a word of invective was directed at us. The full explosive force of the Regimental Sergeant Major's rage was focussed on the Troop NCOs and, especially, poor Cpl W. The SS decided that giving us an Order to crawl through that puddle amounted to an Act of Bullying that would not be tolerated. Cpl W - through no fault of his own - got himself Charged.

We got told to clear off and work on making ourselves and our kit immaculately clean. We did as we were told at double-quick time, no longer laughing. Barrack routine that evening was very busy, and very quiet.

A couple of days later Cpl W was shifted over to the PT Block - he was already a PT Instructor - to be replaced as Section Corporal by LCpl O until they could draft in a new Corporal to do the job responsibly.

On the bright side, Cpl W was freed from his 24/7 nannying-the-newbie-recruits duties, which gave him time to study for his Sergeant Exam - which he passed before I got my Discharge! Every muddy puddle has a chocolate lining, as they say!

Fri 18 Nov - Sun 20 Nov: Days 19-21

0745-0815 - [Inspection] SSM
0820-1225 - Visit to Bagshot Park
1345-1425 - [NBC 4] First aid atropine poisoning
1430-1555 - [FC 6] React to enemy fire
1600-1640 - [FC 7] Duties of a sentry

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 18] Revision (TP staff)
0905-1225 - [FC 8] React to field signals fire and movement
1345-1510 - [FC 9] Erect and camouflage a poncho shelter
1515-1640 - TP Comds disposal

0820-0900 - [Inspection] TP staff
0905-1225 - [FC 10] Construction of personal weapon/position & shelter
1345-1425 - [NBC 5] Alarms and warnings
1430-1510 - [NBC 6] Protection against attack
1515-1555 - [NBC 7] IA drills
1600-1640 - [NBC 8] Canister change / detector paper

Inspection; Field Craft; NBC Training - I could detail the small memories that happened over these three days (building play dens in the woods, for instance) but I don't see the point. I remember glimpses of real events from the timetable's ultra-brief descriptions; as far as I'm aware I've never fantasised them out of their true shape.

The SSM inspection - I have absolutely no idea who this man was. I had to turn to Google to learn that SSM stands for Squadron Sergeant Major, thus one step below Screaming Skull status.

We did get to visit the Chaplains in their posh estate, Bagshot Park. It turns out I have a family connection with Bagshot: my Dad was born very near there - which is weird as the Roots clan is Kent peasant stock to the marrow. Hindhead, where Grandad Last lived with his second wife until he retired from the Army, is also in the general area. Furthermore, Uncle Jim and Auntie Claire kept house in Ascot - they owned the only dog (an evil, mentally deranged bastard of a corgi) that has ever bitten me.

My favourite childhood memory from all these various family connection things is visiting Virginia Water, mainly because the park around the lake has waterfalls and big totem poles stolen from west-coast Canadian Natives. It is a beautiful place - so gorgeous, in fact, that the various Hogwarts lake scenes in the Harry Potter movies were filmed there. Go visit: thank me later!

From what I remember of the Bagshot Park visit, the buildings and park seemed very nice and serene. The fact that the Chaplains also operate as the Army's welfare service didn't register with me until a few weeks ago, when I was researching whether they were called Chaplains, Pastors, or Vicars.

I suppose I could have consulted our Chaplain during my time at Keogh Barracks, if only to get a second opinion on my mad decisions at the time. Whether the poor man would have talked to me after the Singing Incident ... well, that's a different matter.

Anyways. The key thing do I recall about the events over these three days is that they don't include anyone shouting at me. And because a lot of the activity took place outdoors, my emotional state when thinking about them is almost entirely calm, and happy.

... It worried me, I remember, this calm and happy state. Was I about to make a colossal mistake? Was walking out of the Army on a PVR the right thing for me to do?

Negotiation

Dave the Para was getting bored of my intermittent whining about whether I should PVR or not. "If you don't want to PVR," he said. "Tell the fucking Corporal! Don't tell me - you reckon I can do anything about it? You think I give a shit?"

"Yeah," agreed Other Dave. "Tell the fucking Corporal."

I got the message: stop whining, Rik, and polish the fucking floor.

I did what I normally did at such points of my life. I went downstairs for an extra ciggie break, crossing fingers in the hope that the NCOs would be less observant than usual and wouldn't notice my lack of work ethic.

When I wandered back upstairs I found LCpl O standing in the long corridor. On a whim, I went up to him: "Can I ask you something, Corporal?"

He gave me a nod. I remember that he seemed to be - not fully present and correct, let's say.

"Well, the thing is, Corporal," I started, "I don't really want to PVR, but I don't know what else to do ..."

Another silent nod, which I chose to interpret as a 'go on' signal.

"What I want to be is a Combat Medical Technician. But when I went to see the Technical Training Officer he told me that I was too good for that and I had to become a radiographer. Said he was sending me to college for two years."

"You don't want to be a radiographer?"

"No," I agreed, glad that the man was finally talking. "I joined the Army to be a soldier, not a student for two more years. That's why I asked for the PVR."

More silence. I checked the man's face, looked into his eyes (something I very rarely do because: the P Thing - looking at a face and just seeing eyes can freak me out at times); they seemed a tiny touch unfocussed, to me. His cheeks seemed a tad flushed, shiny under the fluorescent lights.

I soldiered on: "Is there any way to get the Colonel to change his mind, Corporal? Let me be a CMT?"

Still more silence. This time I refused to fill it with my own voice. Finally, his eyes focussed into mine: "Leave it with me. I'll see what can be done."

"Thank you, Corporal. Permission to carry on?"

LCpl O was already in motion, moving towards the stairwell. "Yeah," he confirmed. "Carry on."

... And that was that sorted.

I wandered back to my room, picking up a lead bumper on the way. "I told the Corporal," I announced as I walked through the door.

Dave the Para looked up from the boot he was polishing. "Is he gonna do something?"

"He'll look into it," I reported. A pause, then: "You know, he don't look well."

"Has he got the flu?" asked Other Dave.

"Yeah," I nodded. "Maybe he has."

... Though a virus wasn't at the top of my list of possible suspects right at that moment in time.

Mon 21 Nov: Day 22

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 20] Mark time
0905-1640 - Hygiene

At some point the NCOs decided to take more drastic action to solve the problem of the Cursed Room. Carl got moved into the room; Homeboy Lad took his place in our room.

I have to be careful about what I write about HL. Every time I think about him - which I try not to do too often - my mind seems to slip on a pair of scorn goggles, the lenses equipped with filters to block any reasonable, less poisoned memories I might have of the man.

I remember him as young, tall and lanky with crew-cut, light brown hair and a residual spattering of acne and freckles across his face. Very pale, wan skin tone. Not fit; limbs all over the place when he ran ... he didn't match up to the shape or outlook of the stereotypical soldier I had been developing in my head, thus he started with a predisposed disadvantage when trying to make me his friend.

Sticking to facts, rather than opinions clouded by 30 years of cynicism ... he whined a lot more than I did. He hated being in Carl's bed, on semi-permanent display to anyone walking past the door, and begged to swap beds with me on more than one occasion. That was never gonna happen, but he refused to get the message - however many times I told him to fuck off.

I also remember conversations where he boasted about stuff he claimed to have seen or done. Like how to skim a credit card - that conversation left me open-mouthed: I still had sore memories about being singled out for smirking during Day 1 of Final Selection, and couldn't fathom out why HL was trying to impress me with his tale of (potential) criminal activity.

I want to remember him as being a lot lazier than me ... but I think this is the scorn goggles at play. I don't remember our room's Inspection standards falling after HL arrived; falling standards was not something Dave the Para would have tolerated. I do remember being a lot more willing to help the two Daves out with stuff than I was to help HL with his barrack routine.

Anyways, after a few weeks of putting up with the wanker's nonsense I finally managed to convince him to PVR. The next day he showed up with blue flags on his shoulders; a

couple of days later he was gone. I felt no guilt at the time for facilitating his departure, and I feel no shame about it now: somebody had to do it; I'm glad it was me.

How did I manage it? Well, during HL's recruitment the Army Careers Information Office folks had promised him faithfully that he would be able to spend the entirety of his career posted to depots and barracks in the UK, preferably close to where his family lived.

[I swear to God, if that ACIO Sergeant didn't get awarded a medal for Innovative Lying to Facilitate the Recruitment of a New Soldier then there can never be justice in this world!]

When I discovered his story, I decided to make time for HL. I had a good chat with him lasting well over half an hour (my previous record for interacting with him was probably 5 minutes) during which I detailed the facts of life of being a soldier as it related to postings. I particularly emphasised that the chances of him avoiding a posting to Germany, Cyprus, the Falklands or - and this was the clincher - Northern Ireland, were basically zero.

It took some while for him to get his head around the concept that his recruiters had lied to him, but when the pieces finally clicked into place ... the stunned bunny look on his face: that is one Happy Memory I have of the weeks I had to endure sharing a room with Homeboy Lad.

Hygiene - I should be able to remember something about the session, given that we spent all day on it. But I don't remember a thing. Research on Google informs me that the subject covers stuff such as digging latrines and making sure soldiers don't die from cholera, which suggests that we covered personal health, and Environmental Health, on Day 22.

If it did involve Environmental Health, then I reckon I've deliberately suppressed those memories. My ultimate goal for joining the Army was to become an Environmental Health Technician; my failure on that front left a bitter taste in my mouth - a bitterness that occasionally returns to this day.

Tues 22 - Weds 23 Nov: Days 23-24

0745-0815 - [Inspection] SSM/RSM
0820-0900 - [DRILL 21] Turns on the march
0905-0945 - [MR 1] Intro
0950-1030 - TP Comds disposal
1100-1140 - [DRILL 22] Turns on the march
1145-1225 - [PT 8]

1345 onwards - Operation Hankley Pankley

Operation Hankley Pankley: where newly commissioned Doctor Officers practice what they've learned about issuing Orders and saving lives on the battlefield while trying not to get themselves, and those around them, killed through stupid acts of Victoria-Cross-worthy bravery.

Morning work done and lunch eaten - well, consumed - we boarded a big luxury coach and headed out of the main gates of Keogh Barracks. The Operation was to take place on the Salisbury Plains. The only thing I knew about the Plains was that it was full of Stonehenge - an ancient monument I had always wanted to visit because it was old and hengey and probably haunted by Druids.

The journey took hours to complete. To help while away the time, the NCOs invited various recruits to the front of the bus to entertain the rest of us with a song or a joke. For reasons I cannot understand I was not invited to share any of the rugby songs I knew with my mates.

We arrived in daylight. The building that was to become our base of operations looked like it was built in the 1960s and then immediately abandoned. Peeled cladding over brickwork; cheap plywood doors hanging at strange angles from single hinges. We lived and slept in a big open space, our sleeping bags set out across the floor in plumb-line-straight rows and columns. The mess area was off to one side - thankfully I remember none of the food served in that place. Smoking was conducted strictly outside.

Concerning sleeping bags: all RAMC personnel got issued with extra big, thick sleeping bags. Not because we were special soldiers who needed to be wrapped up safely in eider; the sleeping bags were an essential part of our medical kit, to be used for the treatment of hypothermia.

When finding a soldier with hypothermia, we were required to strip them naked and pop them in the bag, then strip ourselves naked and slip in alongside them. Why? It's all to do with bringing the patient's core temperature back up to normal levels; the best source of heat in an emergency is another human body, and the most effective way to transfer that heat is through direct skin contact with both bodies wrapped in good, thick insulating material.

In the 1980s all British Army soldiers were convinced that every man serving in the Royal Army Medical Corps was as queer as a nine shilling note. At that time I would've decked any squaddie who accused me of such disgusting behaviour. Cue hollow laughter...

Home Troop's role in Operation Hankley Pankley was to act as wounded soldiers in the battlefield scenario. Through the night, and the following day, groups of us would be tapped for 'wounded' duty. Each of us got presented with a square of card describing our injuries - often with a tastefully sick photo - to hang around our necks, and sent out to wherever we were to start our journey from battlefield first aid post to field hospital to (in my case at least) death.

My first stint as a wounded warrior (nice photo of a punctured lung) saw me and three mates bundled into the back of an Army truck and driven cross-country for about fifteen thousand miles to some high, windy and fuck-me-it's-cold location in the middle of bugger-knows-where.

The truck stopped and we got booted out. The truck drove off. "What do we do now?" I asked Pte Grandad - so called by everyone for being, at 27, the oldest recruit in the Troop.

"Fucked if I know," he said. Night had arrived at some point during our journey and the clouds above hid any illumination the moon might have offered. "S'pose we just wait here. I'm gonna have a fag; you got a lighter?"

A bunch of Combat Medical Technicians jogged out of the darkness as I was finishing my ciggie. As I had a chest wound, I got the privilege of lying on a stretcher while they moved us a surprisingly short distance down the hill to the First Aid Post. Apparently they had decided to go dark when they saw our transport approaching and had left us alone on the top of the hill to see if any of us would entertain them by freaking out. Bastards.

A CMT triaged us. My injuries were too severe, apparently, so I got left outside lying on the stretcher while the others were escorted inside for treatment. By the time the newly commissioned Doctor Officer got round to checking me over I was shivering quite badly.

"I must say," she said as she signed my death certificate, "your acting skills are very impressive. None of the others made any sort of effort."

"I'm not acting, Ma'am," I stuttered between teeth chatters. "I'm freezing!"

"Oh," she said, and started to examine me properly. And then: "Shit - he is cold! What do we do with real casualties?"

"Stick him in your sleeping bag, Ma'am?" suggested the CMT who had triaged me.

"Does he need a bandage, Ma'am?" asked another.

"We need to get him to hospital," she decided. "Is the ambulance on its way?"

None of the CMTs were willing to cure me with snuggles in their sleeping bags, and mine was still at the depot. I got up and shivered my way through another ciggie while waiting for

the green ambulance to arrive. As soon as it drew up I was forced to lie on the stretcher again and jammed into the vehicle, accompanied by Pte G and the others.

The drive to the hospital was fast and uncomfortable. As soon as we arrived the ambulance doors were thrown open.

"Dead. Dead. Dead, and dead," shouted a CMT dressed in full Noddy suit and gasmask. "Why the fuck ain't you twats wearing your NBC kit? The chemical attack alarm went off ten minutes ago! Well, move your fucking arses and go report yourselves dead!"

We moved arses and headed into a huge canvas tent big enough to accommodate several circus rings. Warriors in Noddy suits rushed around in a state of organised chaos; a few of them took a moment from their insane schedules to tell us to get the fuck out of their way: didn't we know this was a fucking hospital?

By this time my bout of hypothermia was wearing off - turned out a blanket was enough to warm me back to active duty. So I took advantage of the madness to find a corner and watch what was going on around me.

... I was in the middle of a real-life episode of M*A*S*H!

I loved that TV series when I was a kid; now I was living the dream! I knew at that point - with some certainty - that this was what I wanted to be part of for the next few years. Not as a doctor or nurse (or a fucking radiographer), but as a fully-clued-up member of a CMT team. Delivering the goods, so to say, rather than processing them back to life.

"Roots!"

I was back at our temporary depot and walking somewhere with some mates, just after sunrise. I looked around to see who was shouting for me: "Sergeant?"

The troop sergeant had had his eyes on me since I had arrived back from my first mission missing my beret. Losing any piece of your equipment, it turned out, was a Major Fuckup; I didn't need any NCO to tell me there would be a Price To Pay when we got back to Keogh - though several of them were kind enough to tell me anyway.

"You're wearing a beret," the man announced as he walked up to me.

"Yes, Sergeant!"

"Is it yours?"

"Yes, Sergeant!" By this time, I was smiling.

"So you didn't lose it?"

"Oh, no. It was definitely lost, Sergeant."

"So where did you find it?"

"It was in the back of the ambulance, Sergeant."

"Ah! Good work, Roots! Don't ever fucking lose it again, hear?"

"Yes, Sergeant! But it wasn't just me who found it. Pte Grandad spotted the driver and Pte Dave persuaded him to let us look inside his ambulance and I did the search-and-find bit, Sergeant!"

... Because another thing I was learning was to spread the credit for 'good work' around. The NCOs liked to see initiative and teamwork and - much like Dave the Para's bible - showing them some examples of initiative and teamwork made them less likely to scream abuse in my face.

The Sergeant's eyes duly widened a little, to acknowledge an act of 'above and beyond'. And we all started the new day a little bit happier than before.

Homeboy Lad had grabbed a billet two sleeping bags to the right of mine. Which meant I had the pleasure of his whining whenever we were both back at base. He wanted to be my friend; I wanted nothing to do with him - our normal relationship at that time.

I was busy polishing my boot when a Corporal walked along and tapped the three lads to the right of me for a special trip out.

"We need to do an airlift," he explained. "You're all going for a helicopter ride!"

Now this was exciting stuff. I had returned from my latest death-run less than half an hour before and had not yet managed to grab any sleep; even so I was gutted to be missing out on a landmark adventure.

HL, apparently, did not share my enthusiasm: "I don't want to go in a helicopter, Corporal. Can you choose someone else instead? Please, Corporal?"

Those of us nearby watched HL spend the next few minutes begging not to be sent aloft. Each excuse he came up with was stupider than the last. Only when tears started rolling down the idiot's cheeks did the Corporal relent: "I don't have the fucking time for this! Does anyone else here want to ride in a helicopter?"

Dave the Para, sat behind me and biting my shoulder in an attempt to stifle his laughter, was on his feet immediately: "I'll go, Corporal!"

The Corporal seemed reluctant to let Dave volunteer: "Can I trust you not to throw yourself out as soon as you're airborne?"

"I promise I won't jump out, Corporal!"

As the lucky winners were led away, I let my astonishment take control of my mouth.

"What the fuck are you playing at?" I demanded of HL. "You were given an order!"

"I didn't want to go," he snivelled.

"So what? You were given a fucking order!"

"Wasn't an order ..."

"Corporal tapped you to do a casualty duty, and you basically told him to fuck off!"

"I didn't ..." eyes wide, head shaking. "I never ..."

"You do know you're in the fucking Army, yeah?"

<open-mouth-silence>

"That you're a fucking soldier?"

"I am a soldier!"

"Then why the fuck are you disobeying orders!?"

"I wasn't!"

"If a screw tells you to do something, you do it! That's what soldiers do: they follow their fucking orders!"

"But ..."

At that moment I glanced over HL's shoulder. Behind him were stood a gaggle of NCOs, clearly in observer mode, each competing to wear the biggest smirk on his face as they watched us bicker.

My danger radar was improving by the day. As soon as I spotted them I reviewed my words, then did the sensible thing. I gave HL one of my better *I-can't-fucking-believe-you* head shakes, and got back to the business of - very quietly - bringing a shine to my still-warm boot.

Operation Hankley Pankley was definitely one of the highlights of my Army career. For a start, it had fuck all to do with basic training.

More importantly, it was fun! It probably wasn't much fun for the newly commissioned Doctor Officers, or the people who had to organise the whole festival, or the CMTs I had been busy admiring while pretending to be their casualty.

By the time Home Troop clambered into our luxury coach to head back to Keogh Barracks I had been on five missions. While the fun soon wore out for others in the Troop, I was still eager for more, keen to get back out into the thick of it, to feel like a real soldier! After missing out on the helicopter ride, I volunteered for my last two missions - just in case something equally as exciting might happen.

My final score was: died during treatment twice; dead on arrival twice; intentionally murdered twice. (I died twice on the first mission). Within five minutes of the coach moving off I was asleep: nobody bothered to wake me up to entertain my friends with some singing during the journey home.

I never did see Stonehenge.

Thurs 24 Nov: Day 25

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 23] Turns on the march
0905-0945 - [MR 2] Grid references
0950-1030 - [MR 3] Conventional signs
1100-1225 - [END TRG 3] 3 miles in trg shoes
1345-1425 - Pay Parade
1430 onwards - [NBC 9] Respirator checks unmasking/eating/drinking skills

Pay Parade: many, many minutes of standing in a shuffling line in a corridor, followed by a set of quick, intricate steps and salutes, which resulted in each of us exiting the room with £25 in notes clutched in our fist.

Major M always paid us - as was only right. Pay Parade is a core part of the Commanding Officer's job, dating back to the days before the Bubonic Plague wiped out a quarter of England's peasant population. My Dad, and both my Granddads, would have performed the exact same manoeuvre in front of their COs during their years in the Army.

Most of my pay went direct into my bank account. The cash I received was pocket money for incidental expenses such as coke, sweets, boot polish and fags.

There was an alternative set of dance steps for soldiers who were not receiving any cash at Pay Parade. I got to practice those steps in the last couple of weeks of my time in Keogh, when a decision was made to try and limit my nicotine intake and sugar-starve me into submission. Even though I was no longer entitled to cash handouts, I still had to attend Pay Parade: not even I was strong enough to break from that tradition.

The best way to check whether a respirator works, according to the British Army, is to slip it over a soldier's face and place both in a small, enclosed space full of noxious fumes.

According to Wikipedia, the main effects of exposure to 2-chlorobenzalmalononitrile - tear gas - are: a burning sensation and tearing of the eyes to the extent that the subject cannot keep his or her eyes open, and a burning irritation of the nose, mouth and throat mucous membranes causing profuse coughing, mucous nasal discharge, disorientation, and difficulty breathing, partially incapacitating the subject.

According to Rik, being shoved into a tiny, poisonous room with a defective gas mask clamped to your face ... it fucking hurts!

After practicing our eating and drinking skills in fresh air we were marched to a cabin some distance from other buildings and divided into groups of (I think) four. 3 Section, being at the arse end of the alphabet, had a long time to wait before we got our turn in the wooden Hell-hut.

We watched with some interest as the first group were led into the little room. Some five minutes later, one by one, gas casualties got released back into the world with snot covering their faces and lung tissue sprayed over each other's Noddy gear. Some coughed louder than others, and the coughing was still going on while the next group - by now a lot more reluctant - were ordered into the hut.

My group's turn finally came just as the setting sun chose to paint the clouds in blood. We pulled our gas masks over our faces, checked each other's seals, and shuffled through the smoking entrance.

The room turned out to be surprisingly light, if a bit misty. In turn we were each given a dry biscuit, for consumption, and a bottle of water from which we had to take two sips.

My throat began stinging within the first half dozen breaths: I had either fucked up when screwing the filter canister to the mask, or when pulling the bastard thing over my face. To add to my pleasure, I was half-blind because the new lenses for my mask were still on order and I hadn't bothered to spit-clean the existing ones.

Around me, voices. Commands to "Eat!" and "Drink!" - followed by a wheeze of splutters - followed by attempts to scream number-rank-name into the aether. Fog swirled around us each time the door opened to release another victim back to the herd.

Then came a double-tap on my shoulder. My turn. I took a big breath in, lifted the mask from my face and started to munch on the biscuit. A rap on my knuckles reminded me that I had to fix the mask back into place while I chewed. The biscuit - a digestive - tasted quite nice as I mixed it into the spittle-froth already bubbling in my cheeks.

The effect of tear gas on the eyes - it feels a lot like being stung by wasps.

I had developed my wasp phobia at age 6 when, during one early summer school lunch break, I had eaten a wasp that had been eating my apple. The resulting stings in my throat had left me sat in the School office struggling to breathe for over an hour, and a fear of wasps so deep and insistent that it had taken me the best part of the following decade to overcome it.

By my second sip of (warm) water my eyeballs were telling me that my gas mask was now home to a swarm of fucking hornets! At that point I lost all sense of self-control; luckily my limbs were shaking so badly that I had no strength to hammer my way through the bastards stood between me and the invisible door.

Another tap on the shoulder: "Mask off!" muffled someone close by my ear. "Scream us your name!"

I remembered I had to take a big, deep breath before performing this last task. I forgot that I was supposed to take that breath before pulling the mask from my face.

... I died.

Someone's size eleven boot must have taken pity on my sorry arse and kicked me through the door. I have no memory of getting out of that room. I do remember the subsequent puddle of vomit, the artistic way the little bits of diced carrots splashed over my boots.

I was still bent over spluttering a good 3 or 4 minutes later when the Troop Sergeant wandered over to me, put a consoling arm around my shoulder.

"Course," the man told me in a rather-too-jolly tone, "that test is always worse for the smokers!"

Fri 25 - Sun 27 Nov: Days 26-28

0745-0815 - [Inspection] OC
0820-0900 - [DRILL 24] Eyes left / eyes right
0905-0945 - [NBC 10] Revision
0950-1030 - [NBC 11] Test
1100-1140 - Initial TTO RAMC talk
1145-1225 - [PT 9]
1345-1425 - TABT 2 / Polio 2
1430-1555 - [MR 4] Contours
1600-1640 - TP Comds disposal

0820-0900 - [DRILL 25] Revision 1-15 18-24
0905-0945 - TP Comds disposal
0950-1030 - [MR 5] Distances
1100-1225 - [MR 6] Bearings
1345-1640 - TP Comds disposal

0820-0900 - [Inspection] TP staff
0905-1030 - Church
1100-1640 - TP Comds disposal

I look at the timetable, and lots of little memories pop up. Again, I don't feel a great urge to write about most of them.

Map reading ... I will mention. Because I've always loved looking at maps - a good map is a story in its own right, if you have the eyes to seek it out. I still draw fantasy maps for myself, when I have the urge and the time.

Back in the late 1970s my brother Alan acquired a complete set of Ordnance Survey maps for England, folded and stored in a leather-covered box. They were fifty years out of date at that time, thus worthless - except to me: I spent entire days with maps over my knees imagining mountains and rivers and mighty cities, and made up histories to go with small valleys and their ruined churches and mills.

The maps we were given during basic training covered Ash Vale, Keogh and the surrounding area. They failed to include any signs or marks pinpointing areas of recent man-eating rabbit activity.

Still, I had no problems learning how to fold, and read, maps in approved military fashion. Relating the flat map features to my real surroundings - that was a little more difficult ... because, surprisingly: the P Thing. It turns out it's not just faces that us prosopagnosiacs have problems with.

Warning: never trust me with a map!

I remember that the 'Initial TTO RAMC Talk' was not given by my old frenemy, the Technical Training Officer Colonel. Still, this was one of the more important classroom-based sessions for my mates: talk of trade options - alongside the excitement of our forthcoming camping trip in the woods - dominated the Troop gossip that evening.

I didn't join in the trade chat; I was still waiting to hear back from the NCOs about whether I could stay in the Army and not be a radiographer.

... Yeah. Maybe I should have followed up on that request, rather than leaving it to LCpl O to "see what could be done" for me. Whatever.

Mon 28 - Tues 29 Nov: Days 29-30

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820 onwards - Exercise First Try

Exercise First Try - a two day adventure in the woods where we got to practice our nascent field craft and map reading skills, and camp out under the stars with dangerous man-eating rabbits. Also: brambles.

Inspection was different that morning. Instead of displaying most of our kit in our display lockers, we had to display it draped over our bodies or packed tightly into our webbing.

Most of our webbing kit - except for our gas masks - was hand-me-down stuff, well-worn and battered by previous generations of recruits. Our helmets probably dated from the Second World War: tin things with wide brims straight out of Dad's Army - nothing like the modern (1980s) helmets which everyone else in the British Army seemed to have been issued with. Thankfully, the NCOs never forced us to wear them; I think they were as embarrassed by them as we were.

And then we were off, marching out of Keogh and into the woods.

I've never had much need in my life to go walking through woods. It's an okay activity in the warmer months when there's stuff to look at, but a copse in November is a sad, boring thing: bare trees; heaps of leaf litter hiding grassy tufts big enough to break ankles; lots of ferny stuff. Bramble.

Bramble I knew, and understood. It grows like mad in the hedges and ditches and bomb craters that maze and stud the Romney Marshes. From July a person can lose themselves in that flat terrain safe with the knowledge that they will never starve: there's always blackberries to be found, for those willing to risk their skins to gather them.

Foraging in an English wood in late November - it's a waste of time. Most of the good stuff had already been buried by squirrels - rats with attitude and bushy tails. Rather than fight squirrels for food, we spent the morning practicing some map-reading and orienteering exercises. In my case this was mostly guessing and pointing at stuff. We also got to camouflage ourselves and crawl through dead leaves. Lobbing pine cones at squirrels and NCOs may also have been involved.

Lunchtime arrived. We gathered around an olive truck to receive our ration packs, and instructions on which pockets and pouches to carry them in.

"Don't look like normal rations," said Dave the Para, ever-observant.

"Nah," agreed the Corporal. "They're Arctic ration packs."

"Oh," said Dave. Then: "Have we got more water?"

We didn't have more water. The difference between normal packs, and Arctic packs, was that the Arctic ones needed added snow (because: Arctic = snow + heat = water).

Unfortunately for us there had been a comms fuckup between the food suppliers and water suppliers; there was just enough water for the Troop to brew our essential tea, and fill our canteens.

Lunch was dried biscuits, with added grumble.

The afternoon session was devoted to learning how to camp, Army style: establish boundaries, secure perimeters, designate latrine areas, challenges and passwords, where to build bivouacs, etc. Then we got to practice what we had just learned.

We worked in pairs. My usual strategy when told to work in pairs was to wait for the pair-fight to die down, then work with whoever was left over. On this occasion I found myself being targeted by several mates - not a regular state of affairs.

Dave the Para, who had been avoiding me all day, won that fight. "He's with me!" he announced, his arm tight around my choking neck as he glared the others into submission. I wasn't gonna argue. Being chosen by the Bloke with the Biggest Fucking Clue was an excellent outcome for me.

People started on the work of constructing bivouacs. This involved finding a relatively level area of dirt under a low branch or sturdy bush and then attempting to turn a waterproof poncho into a tent. Tethers were the ever-useful bungee cords, several of which soon launched themselves into the air for no reason whatsoever.

Dave had other ideas: "Give us your poncho," he told me.

"Why?" I asked, handing it over.

"We're gonna build a proper bivvy we can both sleep in."

"Okay," I agreed, clueless.

I did most of the building and securing work, while Dave gave instructions and held things down at critical moments. Soon enough, we crawled into our new two-man tent and started searching the dirt for hidden pine cones.

I was unrolling my sleeping bag when LCpl O popped his head into the space.

"Having fun yet?" he asked.

"Corporal!"

"Water truck's arrived, so you can start cooking. After you've eaten, get some shut-eye: you're on stag at zero hundred hours."

"Corporal!" responded Dave. Then as the man walked away: "You know how to cook?"

"I can cook."

"Good. We'll pool our rations, see if we can come up with something decent."

Of course I could cook! Mother had taught me the basics of cooking before I was 10 years old: preparing and boiling stuff; shoving stuff into ovens; following instructions on packages of stuff; checking stuff to make sure it wasn't sticking, or burning. Mum also made damn certain that I understood the fundamentals of washing stuff up after we had eaten - dinner chores in our house didn't end when the food hit the table.

That evening I prepared us a nice cottage pie from the dehydrated mince, potatoes and vegetables, all heated up over a tiny Army issue stove thing. Dave supplied extra salt, pepper and herbs from a secret stash that he kept in one of his pockets. I even decorated the top of the mash with swirly fork patterns before crisping it up using the flame from the other stove thing.

We would have enjoyed a good meal, except NCOs kept casually wandering past demanding to sample our efforts. After yet another Corporal had snatched an over-generous fork of food, me and Dave exchanged glances, divvied up the remains and wolfed them down in seconds. By the time the Sergeant popped by to see how we were doing I was already rinsing and drying the square tin pans, ready for packing away.

Someone booted us awake shortly before midnight. I followed Dave to the camp perimeter and settled into a still-warm scrape in the ground, alert for all attacks. Time passed. At irregular intervals we'd hear a marauding NCO beyond the perimeter and issue whispered challenges. 0100 arrived, along with some mates to relieve us.

"Not a single rabbit attacked us," I complained to Dave as we made our way back to our luxury bivouac.

"You what?"

"Man-eating rabbits!"

"You come out with some weird shit, mate. Man-eating what...?"

... Apparently, all the conversations I'd been having over the past few weeks about the threat of man-eating rabbits had been taking place in my head. I tried to explain it to him as we stumbled along the dark path.

"Fucking idiot," decided Dave as we reached the bivvy. "Most dangerous fucking thing in these woods is an Officer with a Map!"

I sat on my arse and started unlacing my boots, ready for some more kip. Dave told me to stop.

"Corporal told us to sleep in our undies," I reminded him.

"Fuck him," whispered Dave. "Don't get undressed. Sleep with your boots on. Need to be ready for the fireworks!"

The attack came around 0200 and included bright red flares, smoke, rifle bursts, and lots of shouting. As had been explained to us some twelve hours before, the thing we needed to do when under attack was grab everything and run like fuck towards the designated exit route. Dave was more prepared than me - I think he may have slept in his webbing - but I wasn't far behind.

Because Dave had directed the building of the shelter it was an easy job for us to dismantle it without bungee cords flying in all directions and soon enough we were hoofing it half a mile through brambles and shit to our second camp of the night.

... And then came one of those special moments - a memory that makes me smile even today, thirty years after the fact. One of the last people to arrive at our new campsite was Homeboy Lad, naked except for his knickers. The twat had left everything behind: tent, webbing, clothes - the fucking lot! The only thing he didn't forget to pack was his big bag of moans, which he employed with some gusto as he was forced to tramp back through the woods to try and recover as much of his kit as he could find in the dark.

Fun over, the rest of us got put to work setting up our new temporary camp - which wasn't as much fun as it sounds as our night vision had been ruined by the fireworks.

Dave had his new bivvy built and occupied while I was still trying to work out if all the bangs and flashes were over for the night. I wandered off a few paces and found a level space under a bush - which turned out to be right next to the track leading to the latrine area: I slept no more that night.

Dawn was typically late (because: December) so we were all up and about preparing our breakfasts in the dark. Dave was back by my side for this activity; we were already fed - porridge, with added dried fruit from one of Dave's pockets - and washed up and in the middle of shaving by the time the first NCO turned up to steal our food.

Just because we were in the middle of a wood, we didn't escape morning inspection. I had spent the wee hours polishing boots and beret (because: no chance of sleeping) so all I had to do was lay out everything exactly as Dave did, complete with shaving gear placed neatly on top of my poncho-sleepsack-beret bed block thing.

The only difference between my display, and Dave's, was that I had three bungee cords set in straight lines next to my not-bed block thing. Dave had four of the bastards, the bastard!

I managed to get through the inspection without any NCO pointing out the discrepancy. They didn't need to say anything: the brief smiles they gave me when they counted the bungees was enough to warn me of some exciting consequences to come.

The morning's entertainment started soon after sunrise. Homeboy Lad was first up (because: award-winning incompetence), running several lengths along a dirt road holding his webbing and kit bag over his head. Whenever he stopped running, a friendly NCO screamed some abuse into his ears to get him to take a few more steps.

Others followed. It turned out that Home Troop had been particularly untidy during the attack, leaving behind multitudes of kit for map-bearing Officers to confiscate in the aftermath.

The final missing items to appear from the back of the treasure truck were many handfulls of bungee cords, hooking themselves into knots as the Sergeant waved them over his head: "All the idiots missing a bungee cord, line up on the track now!"

This beasting was different. The NCOs were of the opinion that having us dash around waving bits of elastic over our heads was not much fun at all. Instead we - easily a third of the Home Troop recruits - ranked up and marched ourselves along the track towards our punishment.

We came to a place where logs were stacked neatly in racks. Well - I call them logs: these were not pieces of wood that could be tossed easily onto a living room fire. These were the sort of logs an American homesteader would've been happy to use for the walls of their cabin. Each log required four soldiers to lift. When my turn came, I discovered I could just about curl my arm around it so my hand reached the top of the log as it crushed my shoulder.

Our punishment was to jog through the woods carrying the log. Every so often the NCO pacing next to us would tell us to 'change shoulders', which involved hefting the bastard weight over our heads and onto the other shoulder. Soon enough the NCO got bored and ordered me - being the last man on our log - to do the shouting.

I didn't complain. I liked shouting; I liked feeling the power when I screamed the order and, like a well-tuned engine, we performed the shift without breaking step or dropping the fucker.

... Then we came to Heartbreak Hill.

Every recruit training centre, in every army across the globe, will have a hill called 'Heartbreak Hill'. I remember the one shown on the TV documentary 'The Paras' was more like a small mountain, with recruits required to drag a massively heavy wheeled cannon up its slope. Keogh's HH was nowhere near as horrid as that - it was more of a gentle slope with a few muddier, steeper bits along the way. We got to tackle the climb three times, to make up for the piss-poor qualities of the incline.

Other teams had a lot more fun on HH than my team did: slipping in the mud; dropping their logs; learning some new and interesting words from their NCOs as they fucked up the challenge.

I was the shortest member of our team and, thanks to the perversity of our NCO, the one at the back. So when we went up the hill most of the weight of the log ended up on my shoulders. Whatever. I was a (former) athlete! Doing sets of (steep) hill sprints with weights strapped to my back had once been a bread-and-butter part of my winter training regime. I was quite disappointed when we got told to head back after the third lap ... but not too disappointed. Even I was getting to the limits of my stamina by that time.

What can I say about the rest of our time in the woods? Not much interesting, to be honest. More field craft. More maps stuff. Judging distances. Fire orders and attack formations - stuff that a budding Combat Medical Technician needs to know and understand, but would probably not need to get involved in (I'm guessing), given the more pressing need to bandage up wounded soldiers and cart them away from danger on a stretcher.

... Would a radiographer - which is what I was, allegedly, supposed to become - ever see a combat zone? I'm betting the answer is 'no', but please do feel free to correct my assumptions in a vitriolic post to Facebook.

I did learn some interesting hand signals from Dave the Para. Not the authorised hand signals. There was one for "CO not happy" which parodied steam exploding from ears. Another was the sign for "Time for a brew" - a cup-shaped hand with the other hand covering it like a saucer. Essential signals to know!

Our adventure in the woods ended as the sun was setting, with Home Troop marching back to Keogh in a very tired, and slightly muddy, state. Back to the realities of showers and laundry and Army Catering Corps 'food' and never-ending barrack routines...

I remember a dream I had, on some unknown night after Operation First Try. There were Officers in the woods, each carrying a blank map and a killing squint in his eyes, chasing me through shrubbery as I dragged a log towards a lost place of safety. Their ears were long, and pert, and silky.

Wed 30 Nov - Thurs 1 Dec: Days 31-32

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-1030 - [SAA 1] Stripping / assembling / cleaning
1100-1140 - Union Jack Club
1145-1225 - [PT 10]
1345-1425 - [MR 7] Orientation
1430-1510 - SASRA
1515-1640 - Hand back exercise equipment

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-1030 - [SAA 2] Load / unload / make safe / IA / stoppage drills
1100-1225 - [END TRG 4] 3 miles in boots
1345-1640 - [MR 8] Relation to ground / selecting routes

Question: at this point in time, did I notice that I had been in the Army for a whole month?

I don't think I did. I have no memory of such thoughts. Trying to think myself back into the moment of this row in the timetable, all I can feel is ... Army. Doing, learning, becoming - nothing else mattered at this point. Every day different and yet every day the same. Every hour a challenge: be here; be quick; be awake...

Whatever. Us Home Troopers had our very first weekend leave to discuss, plan, dream about. No time for idle chat about life before enlistment!

The Union Jack Club - that's a sort of hotel in London which offers service and veteran personnel cheap, short-term accommodation. A long time later I finally got round to visiting the place, to meet up with my friend Thor - a man of Icelandic extraction who served with the

Canadian forces during the big war. He'd spend a few weeks at the place as a mid-flight break during his annual migrations between the gay hotspots of Reykjavik and the Yumbo Centre in Playa de las Americas, Tenerife. The place seemed clean enough.

SASRA stands for the Soldiers' And Airmen's Scripture Readers Association. Yeah. Given that I expelled myself from Sunday School soon after my fifth birthday, those poor saps stood no chance convincing me of anything Jesus-related. I would've been more interested in joining the Tufty Club, an organisation that at least served a useful purpose.

At various points during Basic Training, Officers and/or NCOs would remind us that while we were One Hundred Percent British Army soldiers we were also, at the same time, One Hundred Percent Royal Army Medical Corps soldiers. The big bumper fun book of rules on being a soldier - also known as the Geneva Conventions - applied a different set of rules to medical personnel, to make us not-quite-soldiers, if you know what I mean.

For a start, medics were allowed to be on the front line, but under no circumstances were they allowed to carry any weapon more dangerous than a wet sock - our job was to save lives, not take them.

Thus the weapon of choice for RAMC personnel in the late 1980s was the sub-machine gun - a device that looked like it had been built out of left-over pieces from a Meccano [US readers: Erector] set. The purpose of the weapon was to provide self-defence, either by shooting attackers who came within spitting distance, or by clubbing them over the head with it when the bullets missed their target. As long as we promised to treat the casualty's wounds after inflicting them, of course.

Weapons training should have scared me (because: once went on a CND march). In fact it was fun! I had no problems with learning to handle, break down, clean, load and fire the weapon I was loaned for these training sessions.

I had been doing similar work with shotguns and air rifles since I was a kid.

Unlike most of the other recruits, I was born into a rural family; we were peasant blood to our marrow and hunting - real hunting, for food - was something my Dad and brothers, well, they just did it. Usually very early in the morning.

We always had weapons in the house, kept in a cupboard that was supposed to be locked at all times. My favourite was Dad's over-and-under double-barrel shotgun, which was a beautiful piece of machinery with some intricate engraving on the metal bits of the stock. The

other shotguns were almost as exquisite; the air gun I inherited from brother Alan was extremely dull in comparison.

I remember Dad had a little sideline business, refilling shotgun cartridges with pellets and bang. He used to let me watch him at work in the dilapidated caravan in the back garden where he kept all his tools. Sometimes he'd remember to pinch out his ever-present rollup ciggie before starting to pour the powder into the plastic casings.

At the other end of the process, Mum taught me how to pluck and draw duck carcasses long before I hit puberty; she hated doing that work herself.

I didn't often go hunting - the few times I fired a shotgun as a kid, the kick would invariably land me on my arse. But I certainly learned how to break the weapons down, and how to thoroughly clean them. While all my schoolmates were sniffing glue for fun, I was getting high on gun oil fumes.

Anyways. The two important lessons involved with learning about the SMG are: first, find and operate the little safety thing; and second, clear the chamber after the bastard misfires.

Our SMGs had three settings on the safety:

- > 'I promise not to kill you'
- > 'I will fire a single bullet but only if I like you'
- > 'This is how we do it in the movies'

The third setting was for controlled bursts of fire - no more than 3 or 4 bullets at a time, to be generated by a firm, gentle and (importantly) brief squeeze on the trigger.

... In theory, of course. The most likely outcome from squeezing the trigger, we learned, would be a clunking sound as the bullet sprung into the chamber and promptly forgot where the exit was. Followed by all the fun of rescuing it from its predicament without letting it blow up in our faces.

Not that we got to practice any of this knowledge; Range Day was a long week into our future.

We had finished our training for the day. The entire troop was gathered together for an informal pep talk from Major M. Strong, slanting early winter sunshine lit the scene: no wind, quite warm.

We sat, relaxed, in a loose, deep quarter circle on a grassy incline while Officers and NCOs stood at ease, all listening while our CO concluded his speech about our (mostly good) progress to date.

"Does anyone have any questions?" asked the Major.

I had no questions. I was hoping nobody else did either, because I was drowsy and looking forward to some nicotine, food, and a big mug of bromide-laced tea.

Somebody over the other side of the group put their hand up.

"Yes, Pte Dave?"

"Pte Roots doesn't want to PVR, Sir."

"You WHAT!?"

... Apparently, that was me! I can still feel that shock of adrenaline as it poled my spine and cracked my neck high.

<silence>

"Is this true, Pte Roots?"

"NO, SIR!!"

My answer was immediate, visceral. No thought in it. Final.

<more silence>

And then the Major was speaking - some words about 'a lot of paperwork' which, frankly, I couldn't be arsed to understand. I was too busy panicking at what I'd just done, a knot of certainty forming in my guts that there would be Consequences Arising from my sudden outburst and vehement denial.

There were no consequences. Nobody else had a question. We stood and ranked up and marched back to Barracks and fell out and clattered through doors and up stairs and into rooms and got about the business of bickering our way through dinner and barrack routine. I have no memory of anyone asking me about the exchange, or of me asking Dave the Para why the fuck he said what he said.

What I do remember is the growing certainty within me, as the evening went on, that my thoughtless response was the only correct answer to the Major's question. It was the truth: I didn't want to be in the Army.

It was time for me to move on.

Disengagement

One evening, Dave the Para decided to go AWOL.

Dave had an old mate in the Medics, a former Para who had re-enlisted in the RAMC because he was bored of the civvie life. The mate had completed his medic training (compulsory CMT3 course, weeks 9-16 in the timetable) with the Troop before Jee Troop, and was now living in the Accommodation Block closest to the Parade Ground while waiting to be posted wherever.

When Dave arrived, he had brought all his kit with him (because: Army Reserves) and had to get rid of it quick when told he would be doing 8 weeks basic, so he slipped the gear to the mate for safe keeping. Now he wanted to retrieve his proper boots.

Dave told me all this one evening, while I was busy ironing stuff.

"So can you watch my back, yeah?"

"How d'ya mean?"

"While I go get my boots?"

"What am I watching for?"

"Just cover for me if anyone asks. Don't tell 'em where I've gone."

"Okay," I agreed. "You gonna be long?"

"Not long," Dave smiled. "Out and back in no time, me!"

... Yeah, right.

Half an hour later I was downstairs treating myself to a smoke when New Corporal stalked into my face: "Where's Pte Dave?"

"Last time I saw him was upstairs, Corporal." Which was technically true.

"I need words with him. Tell him to get his arse to the office now!"

"Corporal!"

I abandoned my half-smoked fag and hared back up the stairs, back to our room, and did what I normally did in such circumstances:

... Panic!

Our evening orders were clear. Except for the NAAFI run, and the remote chance of an alarm, we were not permitted to leave the accommodation block under any circumstances whatsoever after dinner. I knew damn well where Dave the Para had gone; there was no way I could get NC's order to him.

I did the next best thing. Boots and polish in hand, I hid behind the door and started shining leather. If I ignored the situation long enough, I decided, it might sort itself out.

A few minutes later Other Dave returned from wherever he'd been hiding. "Corporal's screaming for you," he informed me as he dumped stuff on his bed.

"Fuck!"

"What's going on?"

I broke my promise to DtP and let OD into the secret.

"Shit!" Then: "Ain't that him down there?"

OD was looking out the window. "Where?" I shouted as I abandoned the boots and jumped over beds to join him.

OD pointed to a ground floor window in the Block opposite ours. I could make out a couple of body shapes beyond the glass.

"Bastard!"

"Reckon we can get his attention?"

Not an option, I decided. Shouting would alert everyone to the situation. We could try chucking stuff at the window, but OD was only just a bit better than me at aiming pine cones; my 'targets hit' count was still stuck at zero.

"Someone's gonna have to go over."

"Don't look at me!" said OD, eyes wide.

... Bugger!

I had no choice. Time for me to pull on the Man Suit, grow a fucking pair. Take action!

For the first - and only - time in my Army career, I deliberately broke an Order. With cat-like stealth I manoeuvred down two flights of stairs, shushed the current allotment of smokers gathered around the bin-lid ashtray by the exit, and sneaked into the forbidden Outdoors.

Like a natural born commando, I crept past the NCO office window and tiptoed through mud to reach the other accommodation block. Then in my fiercest whisper I summoned an unknown soldier and told them to go find Dave the Bastard.

"What's wrong?" asked Dave, when he eventually turned up.

"New Corporal wants to talk to you. Now!"

"What's he want?"

"Like I fucking know?" I whispered in rage. "Just get your fat cunt of an arse back over there and stop getting me into fucking trouble!"

To his credit, Dave did as I so politely requested. He led the way and I followed his hand signals as we silently broke back into our Block. Within seconds I was scurrying upstairs, keen to get all signs of mud removed from my trainers. When the man returned to our room, some ten minutes later, he was quiet and thoughtful. I've no idea why; I refused to speak to him for the rest of the evening.

... Looking back, checking through all my restored memories, I reckon this was the closest I ever came to feeling like a proper soldier. Which made a change from feeling like a fraud.

Fri 2 - Sun 4 Dec: Days 33-35

0745-0815 - [Inspection] SSM
0820-0900 - [DRILL 26] Revision 1-15 18-24
0905-0945 - TP Comds disposal
0950-1030 - Posting preferences
1100-1140 - TP Comds disposal
1145-1225 - [PT 11]
1345-1425 - [MR 9] Test

14:30 onwards - Weekend leave until 22:00hrs Sun 4 Dec 88

Deciding where to go for my first weekend leave was, in the end, not a difficult decision. Because I didn't get to make it.

The one place I didn't want to go was back to Kent; the thought of having to face the ridicule of family and friends for bailing out of basic training at the first opportunity was not my idea of a good time.

Some of the lads - particularly the ones from Belfast and Dublin - were keen to experience the delights of London and, as soon as they learned of my refusal to go home, they demanded I join them in their first attempt to trash the Union Jack Club. This was an easy thing to resist, on the grounds that I needed a lot more than 80 miles between me and my birthplace in order to relax and have some fun.

"So have you decided yet?" asked Carl.

"Nope."

"Good. You're coming to Cornwall with me."

"Okay," I agreed. And it was done.

Time on that Friday dragged. The postings lecture - no longer relevant to me - went on forever. We finally got our travel warrants just before 1500 and dashed away from the

Barracks with kit bags slung over our civvie-clad shoulders soon after. I travelled with Carl up to Reading where we changed trains and headed west, chasing the sun.

The journey lasted well over 5 hours. The first hour was taken up with shop talk and Carl's plans for the weekend. Then we dozed for a while because it got dark and there's nothing better for sending me to sleep than sitting on a train staring out of the window at a shitload of sod all.

The ticket inspector woke us, which gave me an opportunity to show him my Armed Forces Railcard alongside the open return to Redruth. As the man was checking Carl's card I glanced around. The train was crowded, but we had a double seat each with a table between us.

"Why are people staring at us?" I whispered as the inspector moved on.

Carl gave me one of his special '*Are You Truly That Stupid?*' smiles: "We're Squaddies!"

I spend the next couple of minutes in silent wonderment. Had five weeks in basic training really changed me that much? My reflection in the black window seemed to confirm it: the stranger looking back at me (because: the P thing) looked like someone I'd have been wary to meet. He appeared far more comfortable in his skin than I felt; upright, alert, not scared to stare out strangers. Better than me, and yet at the same time - me!

When I looked back at Carl, we were both grinning. And then we laughed.

The thing I most remember about my weekend in Cornwall is the food. Carl had a Mum whose home cooking tasted like manna marinated in love. The pastie and chips in the high street cafe was perfection on a plate; I had to force myself to slow down, to chew the meat and veg with no hurry, like a normal person, and let my tongue savour the delight of decently seasoned fuel.

Nobody shouted at me. The only person who gave me orders was Carl; being told to drink another pint of scrumpy (farm-brewed cider which, in Cornwall, usually comes with the corpses of small voles floating in the cloudy mix) was not a difficult command to follow.

On Sunday morning Carl dressed up in his uniform and boots and walked across a field to meet his Grandad. We were under strict orders not to wear our uniforms in public, but Carl didn't care: he needed to show the old man he was now a soldier. The act was returned with anecdotes about life in the Army after the war - the basic training stories sounded very familiar to me, as if nothing had changed in the decades between then and now.

And then, too quickly, the weekend was done. After our Sunday roast lunch (no alcohol to taint the breath!) we were at the station and travelling on a train moving away from that brief fantasy interlude back towards the real world of loud command and tired obedience. By the time we reached Reading station it was like the holiday had never happened.

My last memory from that weekend is a glorious one! Homeboy Lad arrived back at Keogh just before 2200 with a truly stunning black eye - which didn't save him from an immediate beating. Like Carl, the idiot had sneaked his uniform out of the Depot so he could show it off to his mates. Unlike Carl, he chose to display his new status in a town centre pub on a Saturday night.

... Yeah. Squaddies caused Trouble and were Bad News! Except for the truly stupid ones, of course.

Mon 5 Dec: Day 36

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 28] Revision 1-15 18-24
0905-1030 - [SIGS 1] Net security and aids to security
1100-1140 - [DRILL 29] Slow march and halt
1145-1225 - [OBS TRG 1]
1345-1510 - 23 Para Fd Amb demo
1515-1640 - [SIGS 2] Accuracy and aids to accuracy

My memories of our Troop Commander are thankfully scant. All I can see of him now is a lanky sneer topped with a maroon cap. I've no idea about how, or when, the young Lieutenant had earned his paratrooper beret. I also never learned what he had done to land himself a posting with the RAMC Recruitment Division.

Clearly the man wanted to lead real soldiers into battle; instead he had Home Troop. Cue the tiny violins.

Most of our first afternoon back involved us looking at photos of men dressed in parachute gear, or dangling from ropes attached to parachutes. After lunch the TC had formed us up in ranks and marched us down to the big room which we had first met on Day 1. The pictures were stacked around the edge of the room. On a stage in the middle of the space stood a real-life soldier, all dressed up and ready to leap out of the first available plane.

"I don't know why we have to waste our time here," sneered our TC as we assembled in the hall. "None of you will ever be good enough to serve alongside my Regiment!"

Dave the Para took up the challenge without hesitation. As soon as he was able, he jumped up alongside the display soldier, stripped him of his parachutes and webbing and, with expert speed, prepared himself to launch into the air.

This demonstration was far more interesting than looking at a bunch of photos. Even as Dave clicked the last buckle into place, the Troop were debating who should be next to try on the kit. The obvious choice was Pte B - the shortest of us; he was happy to be hauled up onto the stage to have a go.

As the laughter continued I moved away. Each of the photos around the room came with some descriptive text. I wasn't interested in reading it: I just wanted some distance between me and what I already knew was coming.

"C'mon, Rik! You've gotta have a go!"

... It wasn't easy to ignore my mates, but I managed it. This was their life, not mine. They needed to learn that sometime soon I wouldn't be their mate anymore.

Tues 6 Dec: Day 37

0745-0815 - [Inspection] SSM/RSM
0820-0900 - [DRILL 30] Slow march and halt
0905-1030 - [SIGS 3] Basic net and rules for radio discipline
1100-1140 - [DRILL 31] Slow march and halt
1145-1225 - [PT 12]
1345-1640 - [SAA 3] Practical tests and revision, confirmation

I always worked hard to make sure I could get through morning Inspection with minimal screaming. I never did manage to learn the lesson that, if the bastards want to find fault with best efforts, they would!

Unlike his staff, the Screaming Skull wasn't much into screaming at recruits, indoors, at Stupid O'Clock in the morning.

"You have a shadow on your chin, soldier. Did you shave this morning?"

"Yes, Sir!" I lied.

I always shaved in the mornings - it was the first task of my day, even before my shower. Except for this morning. Someone had distracted me first thing, derailing my early morning routine and, because this was an RSM inspection, the need to get everything else perfect for the man's eyes led to me forgetting about my facial hair until 0720 - by which time it was too late to do anything about it. Access to the washroom sinks at that late hour were expressly forbidden by the team whose job it was to clean them - a precedent I had myself established for the rest of the lads many weeks before, when it was my job to keep the fuckers spotless and sparkling.

I took a calculated risk. My skin was (is!) naturally slow at growing stubble; what normal men can grow in 24 hours would take me five days. Knowing this fact I gambled that, just this one time, I could get away with forgetting to do something for Inspection.

... Yeah. That Karma.

With no drama, almost in slow motion, the Regimental Sergeant Major positioned his face three inches in front of mine, forcing my eyes to lock with his. The touch of his finger as it planted itself onto my cheek and slowly moved along the line of my jaw was almost a caress.

"Did you shave this morning, lad?"

I swallowed hard, accepted my fate: "No, Sir!"

When his finger reached my chin, he applied gentle pressure to ease my eyes closer into his.

"Why not?"

"I ran out of time, Sir!"

"It only takes a couple of minutes to shave, lad. Barely a moment."

Terror speeded my thoughts. The instant had come, my mouth decided, to discover if the man had a ounce of forgiveness hidden somewhere deep in his marrow.

"By the time I realised I hadn't shaved, Sir, the washroom team had finished cleaning all the sinks. I could've tried to have a very quick shave, Sir, but I wasn't prepared to ruin their hard work. Sir!"

<silence>

... Had it worked? The Army liked teamwork - my mouth was relying on that fact. Would the Screaming Skull accept this one, teeny-tiny little fuckup, committed by me for the greater good of my Section?

"Charge him, Sergeant," the man said, his voice completely calm and matter-of-fact.

And then he was gone from my sight, his steps clipping towards the door and the next room awaiting Inspection. The Troop Sergeant followed him, not even bothering to look at me.

The Charge thing at Inspection was a new development for the Troop. As far as we all knew, you had to do something really seriously stupid to earn a Charge. Like when Boxer Bloke decked Short Shouty Corporal with a single fist into his face.

We were used to other consequences. Random screaming-in-the-face wasn't as common as it had been, but having an NCO trash your display, throwing clothes and kit across the floor, remained popular. Beds still got overturned because, frankly, a fucked up bed block was intolerable after five weeks practice. On some days Show Parades would be handed out like sweeties at a kindergarten party. Beastings for fuckups were still the favourite punishment: by this time they were a lot more arduous, but then we were a lot tougher and could perform 50 press-ups without breaking a sweat.

None of the above was good enough for me today. Only a fucking Charge would do for 2-4-?-?-?-zero-private-roots-arr-jay!

The British Army adores a good ceremony. Early on in our training we had been shown a short film explaining all the steps that needed to be observed when a soldier gets himself Charged. What struck me most about the film was the bit where the accused had to remove his belt before being marched into the Commanding Officer's room to go through all the legal stuff.

Why remove the belt? To this day I have no clue; Google offers no assistance. Whatever.

We were settled into our latest Signals lesson, attempting to stay awake while some bloke in front of the whiteboard wittered on about the difference between local and wide area networks, when an NCO appeared at the door and called out my name. It took me a few moments to regain consciousness; luckily by this time I could jacket up and move without needing to think about it.

Outside, I discovered there were two of us on the List of Idiots to be Charged. Stood at attention next to me was Proper Soldier Guy - a Scottish lad from my Section, younger and thinner than me, a few inches taller with a bony, angular frame and intelligent eyes in his face. I had a lot of respect for PSG, mainly because whatever he did, he did it right; from Week One he had been impressing everyone with his abilities to turn himself from Civilian Kid to Operational Soldier with the minimum of effort.

I risked a whisper as we marched towards the Admin Block: "What's going on?"

"Got done for not shaving."

"Oops?"

"You?"

"Same!"

... And as we completed our journey I felt the terror building in my guts release itself. If PSG had managed to fuck up in the same way as me, then there was nothing for me to fear!

New Corporal met us at the top of the stairs leading to Major M's office. We both stood at ease facing the less-than-forbidding door while he explained to us what we had to do, what questions our CO was going to ask us, etc, etc.

"You understand it all, Roots?"

"Yes, Corporal!"

"Good. Cuz you're up first. TEN-HUN! Hand over your belt!"

Within moments I was quick-marched through the door and stood to attention in front of the Major. Somebody behind me screamed out the accusation levelled against me.

"Do you understand the Charge, Pte Roots?"

"Yes, Sir!" I lied.

"Are you happy for me to judge this issue?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"You do not wish to proceed to a Court Martial?"

... *The Fuck?* "No, Sir!"

"How do you plead?"

"Guilty, Sir!"

"Do you want to bring forward any evidence in your defence?"

"No, Sir! I forgot to shave this morning, Sir!"

"This really is basic stuff, Roots. I expect a far better standard from you! Fined £20. Do not let me see you in front of me like this again. Dismissed!"

... And that was that! Seconds later I was back in the corridor, tightening my returned belt around my waist as PSG got screamed into the office in my place.

"What you get?" asked New Corporal.

"Done twenty quid," I admitted.

NC widened his eyes in appreciation: "Fucking idiot! Get your jacket straight before he does you for another twenty."

We arrived back at the classroom just as the Troop tumbled out for a 5 minute ciggie break. PSG - who had taken the same approach as me, and received the same fine - told the

story of our adventure to the mates gathered around us. I stayed quiet, happy to bask in the reflection of his glory.

Wed 7 - Thurs 8 Dec: Days 38-39

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP Staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 32] Revision all drill
0905-1030 - [SIGS 4] Call and answer / offering messages / long messages
1100-1140 - [DRILL 33] Revision all drill
1145-1225 - [PT 13]
1345-1640 - [SAA 4] Training tests & revision prior to APWT

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-1640 - [RANGE DAY 1] Intro / shoot / grouping / cleaning before and after firing / zeroing / elementary application of fire

One day Short Shouty Corporal disappeared from our lives. I have no idea why. A week or so later New Corporal arrived, all bright eyed and keen to make his mark on us.

NC and Spooky Corporal seemed, to me, to be twins of each other (because: the P Thing). Rumour had it that they knew each other from a previous posting to some Unit together. SC claimed that NC was far more green-eyed-warrior than him; I didn't believe the man: both of them would probably have felt right at home in an Action Man box, all wrapped for Christmas.

It didn't help that the two Corporals shared the same last name, meaning we had to memorize and add numbers to their names when discussing them with other NCOs. It was at this point in my training that I really came to resent the small stupidities which added to the fun of Army Life.

Anyways. My first major interaction with NC took place on the rifle range. We had been practicing stuff with our submachine guns for a while; now was the day to put our learning into practice.

"If anyone is nervous about anything to do with this first exercise," announced the Sergeant as a group of us walked onto the range, "put your hand up now!"

I reached my shooting lane and held my hand high - the only person in the group to do so. Not that I was nervous about the exercise; rather I was about to fire a lethal weapon (with blanks, but still) and if there was one thing I knew about weapons, it was that they could be temperamental buggers - especially when you least expected it. If my gun was going to jam, I wanted a Bloke with a Fucking Clue stood behind me to make sure I got the chamber clearing drill right.

My weapon jammed on the second round.

I pulled the sequence of actions-to-take from my recent memory, and spoke my way through them. The only mistake I made was to point the weapon's muzzle towards New Corporal, stood behind me, as I prepared to risk my own eye on the check to make sure the barrel was clear.

"Good to go, Corporal?"

"Carry on," the man confirmed.

I leaned forward and continued to let off single shots. On the sixth round, my weapon jammed.

This time I performed the clearance like a professional, and didn't bother to ask for permission to continue once the checks were done.

I completed the exercise behind everyone else. NC was not impressed.

"That," he told me, "was a shower of shit! How the fuck did you manage to jam your weapon twice?"

"Corporal!"

"Did you clean it properly?"

"Yes, Corporal!"

"I don't fucking believe you," he continued, warming to his theme. "You can lie your way through everything else if you want, Roots, but don't you ever fucking lie to me again when it comes to weapons training!"

"Corporal!"

"I'm gonna keep my fucking eye on you, Roots. You're in Week Six of training and this attitude ain't good enough!"

And then: "You know what? I don't think you're good enough to be here. In fact," the man concluded, "I'm gonna make it my Command Task to get you to PVR before Christmas!"

Oh, joy! Here we go again: "I already have, Corporal!"

"... You what?"

"I've already PVRd, Corporal!"

<silence>

"You fucking what? When?"

"Day 9, Corporal!" By this point in the exchange I was risking a serious beating, on account of the big grin slapped across my face. The look of absolute shock on NC's face was just too fantastic - I had no choice but to laugh at it!

NC stared at me for a few more seconds, then stalked off to consult with his mate Spooky. I watched as the two conferred, SC confirming that 2-4-?-?-?-?-zero-private-roots-arr-jay was telling the absolute truth.

"Well, there you go," said the man when he finally wandered back to my side. "I've achieved my Command Task already!"

"Permission to carry on, Corporal?"

He was still shaking his head: "Fuck off, Roots. Just ... just fuck off!"

Fri 9 - Sat 10 Dec: Days 40-41

0745-0815 - [Inspection] OC
0820-0900 - [DRILL 34] Revision
0905-1030 - [SIGS 5] Correct / repeat / cancel
1100-1225 - [END TRG 5] 3 miles in boots + stretcher
1345-1510 - [SIGS 6] Revision SIGS 1-5
1515-1640 - TP Comds disposal

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff
0820-0900 - [DRILL 35] Revision
0905-1640 - TP Comds disposal

Sports Day - the competition between senior and junior troops - was coming up. Over the course of 5 events - a cross-country run in kit, football, tug-of-war, rugby, and a stretcher race - Jee Troop and Home Troop would go head-to-head to see which troop got to rule the roost.

Normal procedure was for the Senior Troop, with 8 weeks additional training under their belts, to wipe the Junior Troop's faces in the shit. Unfortunately nobody had told the Jee Troop lads this in September. With county level sportsmen in several disciplines in their ranks, Jee had taken their Senior Troop to the cleaners and hung the poor fuckers out to dry.

Home Troop knew we were in for a pasting, so we didn't bother much with preparations; our only aim was to try and get through Sunday morning with minimal injuries, so as many of us as possible could make it to the more important event - drinking alcohol down the NAAFI bar - afterwards.

I'm not a great fan of team sports. My secondary school - Southlands - was big on football and cricket. I had never seen much point in spending all my playtimes kicking a tennis ball

around a monkey cage, so when it came to football I was usually last when mates picked teams. As for cricket - seriously, the most boring game ever invented!

I did Physical Education classes, of course. Mum was not in the habit of writing sick notes for her sons just to dodge a bit of exercise. Football was doing just enough jogging around to stop people shouting at me. Cricket was standing on the edge of a big field daydreaming of stuff like becoming a deep sea diver.

We went swimming two or three times a term. The nearest swimming pool was 10 miles away from school (in Hythe); I spent every single one of those lessons in the kiddies pool, doing my best not to drown.

Other things we did included the occasional bout of tennis, basketball in the gym, badminton - which was a lot more fun than tennis, a bit of circuit training, cross-country running (but only after heavy rain) and - for one horrific term - golf.

What I wanted to do, in those early years, was gymnastics. I had done gymnastics at Dymchurch Primary every week for 3 years, and had really enjoyed it. At Southlands, only girls got to do gymnastics.

Girls also got to play hockey. I didn't play hockey until I reached the 5th year of Southlands when, without even trying (because: lack of volunteers), I made it into the school team. After selection, we got given a couple of lessons on how to hit the ball with a stick, and how not to hit other players with the same stick, before embarking on a spectacular losing streak against teams that had been playing the game for years.

My favourite sport - apart from running and jumping - turned out to be rugby. Again, we were given a term's worth of instruction on how to throw the not-round ball at each other, how to kick the ball into the enemy's faces, and how to tackle the enemy without breaking our shoulders or their limbs. Learning the actual rules of the game was not considered to be a priority by our PE teachers; they only cared that most of us managed to limp off the pitch at the end of each lesson.

The school did have a rugby team, but I was never 'big enough' or 'hard enough' to be in the squad. Which is why I ended up playing hockey.

"Who's volunteering to play rugby tomorrow?"

My hand was up in the air straight away. Given the choice between football, tug-of-war, running around the woods with a heavy stretcher, or getting dirty and muddy with a bunch of other men - it was no choice at all.

"Can you play rugby, Roots?"

"Yes, Sergeant!"

"You play left wing, or right?"

"Flanker, Sergeant!"

"... You sure?"

"Yes, Sergeant!" Because flankers, in my mind, had lots more fun.

... *Oops*.

Sun 11 - Tues 13 Dec: Days 42-44

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff

0820-1225 - Inter-Troop sports

1345-1640 - TP Comds disposal

0745-0900 - Pass Off Parade (POP) rehearsal

0905-1030 - [SIGS 7] Revisions SIGS 1-5

1100-1225 - [END TRG 4] 3 miles in trg shoes + Fartlek

1345-1640 - TTO interviews / TP Comds disposal

0745-0815 - [Inspection] SSM/RSM

0820-0900 - [DRILL 36] Revision

0905-1030 - [SIGS 8] Ex to practice SIGS 1-5

1100-1140 - [SIGS 9] Test

1145-1225 - [OBS TRG 2]

1345-1640 - TTO interviews / TP Comds disposal

I woke up with a vicious hangover - one of the worst I have ever suffered. My body ached in too many different places to list. I remember this. I was in such a bad state that I managed to vomit while trying to shave without shaking the razor through my face.

When I went back to the room, finally smooth jawed and showered, the Two Daves were still sleeping. This angered me; I was convinced that we had a big room inspection at 0745 and our room was in no fit state to entertain the Screaming Skull. I tried to shout them out of their beds, refused to listen to their protests.

I got on with stuff. Only when I checked my watch and saw the time - 0720 - did I finally lose it:

"I've had it with you fuckers! Why ain't you ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"Inspection!"

"We ain't got no fucking Inspection today!"

"... What?"

"No Inspection," agreed Other Dave. "POP rehearsal."

I stared at the two of them, sat on their beds staring back at me. Nothing was making sense to me.

"Fuck rehearsal," I announced. "I'm going on Sick Parade!"

And with that I swung my fist at the light switch on the wall by the door, to switch the room light off.

... It smashed in slow motion.

One shard wheeled past my head towards the middle of the room. Other bits dangled from screws, swinging from the force of the blow while they decided whether to hang around or fall to the floor.

My eyes followed the course of the escaping plastic as it skidded across the floor to end up somewhere under Dave the Para's bed. Dave's face was a picture, his eyes wide and white and his mouth a perfect circle. Other Dave's eyes were, if anything, wider and whiter.

<silence>

And then, very calmly: "If anyone asks, tell them I did it."

I left the room and headed towards Sick Parade, hoping I could reach the muster point before the pain made me vomit again.

Me and pain - we have a complicated relationship.

If anything I've written in this memoir has given people the idea that I am super-macho when it comes to tolerating pain (because: Dentist Monsters), then I have to apologise. I'm not big and tough like that; I just lucked out by accidentally discovering some tricks as a kid - such as the self-hypnosis thing - which might make it look as if I'm that hard-as-nails guy.

Mum helped, of course. Mum had no time for malingerers. Given the choice between facing some pain and facing my Mother's acidic comments about stuff not killing me, I'd battle the hurt every time.

Dad, on the other hand, had no issues with hypochondria: the National Health Service had been set up for a reason, and he was determined to get his money's worth out of the welfare state. It made for an interesting marriage, I suppose.

The one pain I will allow myself to wallow in, is a hangover. If I've paid hard cash for the insult to my body's nervous system, then I'm damn well gonna enjoy it! By my early twenties I had got into the habit of categorising a lot of different types of pain - post-binge cold symptoms, bumps and bruises from falling off sea walls, etc - as 'hangover pain'.

The downside to this approach to life is that while I might have enjoyed moaning about injuries sustained while drunk, I wouldn't bring them to the attention of a doctor (because: hangover - which, as Mum would say, served me right).

I have no idea what I told the doctors when I went on Sick Parade. Given that they gave me nothing more than a foam sling for my arm, I expect I forgot to mention the other pains in my neck and shoulders, and the crashing thumps that were splintering the side of my skull much like the way my fist had splintered the light switch.

My memories arising from Sports Day, and the Monday after, feel different in my head compared to all the other memories I've been writing about. For a start, they're not fuzzy - these memories I remember like I'm watching short movie clips: sharp and clear, full primary colours, audio and aromas intact.

I don't have many of them - no more than a dozen to cover the entire two days. Some are nonsensical, like me trying to breathlessly shout out the number 'eight' as we're lined up after completing a run in boots and kit. There's one of me tackling a player on the rugby pitch; another of me squelching across the muddy pitch wearing one training shoe, hunting for the other.

The breaking-of-the-switch memory is a standout recollection, almost an entire scene captured on Super-8 cine film in my head. The only other memory that compares is the NAAFI Bar moment.

There's six of us sitting in the crowded bar, on a sofa-like bench that wraps around three sides of a table. The other lads have two cans of beer each in front of them; for some reason I have four cans in front of me, only one of which has been tabbed open.

I'm at the open end of the table, so I'm half-aware of people walking past my right side as I listen in to the lads chatting about whatever. I don't notice that a Corporal has come to a halt next to me until he clunks down another can. I watch his hand as he slowly pushes the beer across the table.

Now I have five tins in front of me.

I don't want all this beer.

"Anyone want some of these?" I ask, half-standing to lift one of the drinks to the centre of the table.

"NO!"

I turn my head to look up into the Corporal's face.

He is not happy. "I bought that beer out of my own money, and I'm giving it to you, Roots. Nobody else. You! Now you sit down, and you fucking drink it!"

The stare between us goes on longer than it should. Then the Corporal leans in: "Do you fucking understand me?"

"Corporal," I say as I slowly sit back down, bringing the offending prize back to my stack.

... And there the scene ends, my face starting to burn with embarrassment.

Normal service, memory-wise, resumes for Tuesday. This was the day I met - for the first time in my life - a radiographer.

On the real day of the Screaming Skull inspection I woke up almost hangover-free. I remember this feeling of elation because I had never suffered from a two-day hangover before. The key pain that remained - worse than my headache now - was an intermittent stab-and-burn in the bend of my right arm. It wasn't bruised or swollen; it just hurt like fuck.

Because this was (apparently) my third day in a row in front of the medics, moaning about my arm, they decided to send me to hospital for a second opinion. Cambridge Military Hospital, in Aldershot, looked like any other Victorian hospital to my eyes - cold brickwork, tall ceilings, endless corridors. The big difference was that it was populated by doctors, nurses, orderlies and victims in various types of military uniforms.

I got delivered to the Accident and Emergency doors by car, then spent an age waiting to be triaged by a nurse. More waiting happened before a doctor called me into a consulting room. He didn't bother looking at the offending limb; he read my notes, scribbled on a form and told me to take it, with myself, to the x-ray department.

More waiting. Then a bloke dressed exactly like me, as tall as me (but younger and better looking, the bastard!) called my name and led me into the x-ray room. Having never broken a bone in my body before, I didn't know what to expect.

"Stand here," the lad said. "Position your arm like this ... no, hold it out more ... No!" - grabbing me by the elbow, which made me grunt. "This way. That's it! Now hold it still ..."

The radiographer disappeared for a moment, then reappeared through the door. "All done. You can put your jacket back on now."

"Do you like your job?" I asked as I moved my arm back into its sling and zipped the jacket over it.

"How do you mean?"

"Being a radiographer - do you like it?"

He offered me a shrug and a hint of a smile: "It's a job," he admitted.

He didn't have any go-faster stripes on his arms. Perhaps he'd enjoy the job more when he got his accelerated promotions, I decided, as I wandered back to the main waiting room.

"It's not broken!" I told the Troop Sergeant when I got back to Keogh and reported to the Admin Block.

I gave the man a big smile as I handed him the x-ray image and case notes. I didn't realise until that moment just how relieved I was by the news: part of me had been worrying that people might use the excuse of a broken limb as a reason to further delay my long-ignored PVR request.

"So what's wrong with it?"

"Damaged tissues, Sergeant!"

"Okay." Then: "Follow me."

He led me into the end room where NCOs tended to gather during their 'down time' from training us recruits to man-up and be soldiers.

"Pte Roots," he announced, "is to be taken out of basic training. Someone get him some blue flags and tell him what to do!"

... And it was done.

Resolution

When we returned from weekend leave, we were told to check the noticeboard outside the NCOs office every day. Pinned to the board were sheaves of paper with lists of names: Depot-wide assignments for things like 24hrs guard duty - commonly known as 'stag'.

One evening my name appeared on the stag list, alongside those of the Two Daves. Instead of doing basic training stuff the next day, we had to report to the Guardroom to do our duty defending Keogh Barracks from man-eating rabbit attacks.

The Guardroom was all new territory to me. The only thing I knew, from whispered Troop gossip, was something about a Beam of Light which no recruit was to ever step over. Breaking the Beam of Light, so the story went, was an offence on a par with pimping out your own mother.

To me, the BOL looked like a shiny brass rod screwed into the floor in the middle of the main office - just another thing to polish. I took care not to step over it for the next 24 hours, just in case it triggered some reflex screaming from any nearby NCO.

The building also included two cells, with proper no-nonsense steel doors behind which prisoners could be left to fester. One cell was still occupied by Boxer Boy, but I didn't bump into him during stag. There was also a room with a couple of bunk beds and some very questionable mattresses. This is where we could sleep when not 'on duty' - we were not expected to remain awake and active for the entire 24 hours.

As soon as we arrived Dave the Para negotiated with the Guardroom team that we would be working 'four hours on, four hours off'. He volunteered to take first shift, while me and Other Dave got shown to the bunk room and told to enjoy some extra kip time. I thought Dave was being generous. But no. Dave was just being the Bloke with a Fucking Clue. Serves me right for trusting him too much!

"So what's it like?"

"How do you mean?"

"Army life - is it always like this?"

"What, like stag?"

"Like Keogh!"

"Ahh," said my patrol buddy, a young Pioneer who had managed to get himself onto the CMT3 course as part of a bold plan to improve his life. "Nah. This place is shit!"

We were on patrol, deep in the evening darkness, walking around the Depot, checking to make sure no SAS teams had broken through the perimeter. We had been warned that the Mighty Warriors of Death were in the area, with a brief to test the defensive capabilities of various local military facilities.

Pioneer Lad took the opportunity, during the lapse in our chat, to check in with the Guardroom. The walkie-talkie given to us was broken, so communication was by means of a stunted sort of Morse code, facilitated by repeatedly switching the unit on and off - an action which could be picked up at the receiving end as a series of clicks.

I was surprisingly happy, that evening. For the first time in weeks my life wasn't timetabled: no dashing here and there, no quick-change inspections, no unexpected beatings for improper breathing. No shouting.

My afternoon shift (after a sleepless morning of idle gossip) had been me and Other Dave sitting in the little shed next to the main entrance, popping out every so often to open the barrier to let cars in and out. In between exertions we had watched films on a portable black-and-white TV with terrible reception. Even that was fun: I love watching telly - something I hadn't done for more than a month.

"So, what's the Army really like?"

The lad gave me a big smile. "It's okay. Mostly it's nine-to-five work. Depends on where you're posted, though."

"So is this all we do, on patrol?"

"Pretty much. We'll head back in a few minutes, report in and get a brew."

"Okay," I said - glad to let my new Pioneer friend take charge.

For my last patrol, before dawn, I was partnered with a Sergeant. He chatted to me like I was a normal person, not a piss-prone puppy. To have someone with stripes on their arms not talk (or shout) *at me* was a pleasant revelation, though I didn't believe him when he claimed that this was the normal state of affairs on the other side of basic training, once soldiers got deployed to their units.

As part of the patrol, the Sergeant led me to an area of the Depot I had never visited before.

"Do you scare easy?"

"I'm not great with horror films," I admitted.

"We've gotta check the haunted house."

"Okay!" Ghosts were not on my list of things to be scared of, because: ghost blindness. I've never witnessed a ghost - not even when, while at college, I lived for three terms in a haunted attic.

"So what's it haunted by?"

"Ghosts," said the Sergeant, helpfully. "It's the house where they kept Hess prisoner."

"Who?"

"Rudolf Hess. You know, the Nazi?"

I shook my head. History hadn't been my favourite subject at school. We carried on walking through the night. The house, when we reached it, was securely locked, and I saw no spooky faces peering out of any windows.

As we strode back to the Guardroom, I remember a feeling of loss - regret, even - in the trim folds of my muscled stomach. Army life - it didn't need to be terrifying all the time. Maybe it could even be fun?

... That grief for lost possibilities was gone by breakfast.

I was gone before Christmas.

Wed 14 - Thurs 15 Dec: Days 45-46

0745-0900 - POP rehearsal
0905-1140 - [SAA 5] SLR familiarisation
1145-1225 - [PT 14]
1345-1640 - [SAA 6] Revision lessons 1-5

0745-0900 - POP rehearsal
0905-1640 - [RANGE DAY 2] APWT

I was the last member of the Gang of Four to be taken out of training. Almost five weeks after requesting our PVRs we were all still soldiers, in uniform, following orders.

I don't remember asking the others how they felt about the situation. I expect they were fed up and pissed off, because they had all managed to get themselves removed from training a lot earlier than me.

"So what do we do?" I asked Edinburgh Guy.

"We stand around and wait for people to tell us to do things."

"What, all day?"

"Yeah."

"Don't you get bored?"

"It's better than training," said EG. "They can shove all that fucking nonsense!"

"But you knew what it would be like. You were in the TA, yeah?"

"This is all complete shite! TA was much more fun - can't wait to get back to it!"

Sometimes we stood at ease in the corridor, with windows along one side and office doors along the other. We were told not to salute Officers when they walked by because, surprisingly, Officers weren't as keen to return salutes as I thought they were. We still had to come to attention whenever they, or any stray NCO, wandered past us.

Sometimes the NCOs would invite us into their room, where we could join in the chat - within reason. I got beasted several times for speaking out of turn, but nothing more severe than 50 press-ups.

The jobs we got given - I don't remember most of them. Running messages, for the most part. By the end of Wednesday I was bored beyond endurance, deeply regretting the fact that I'd been taken out of training. If it hadn't been for the other members of the Gang I would have asked to be put back into training. But they kept me strong, kept telling me that if we could get through the boredom, together, our Discharge Day would surely come.

Fluffy Corporal worked in the background, preparing stuff for the lessons we had to endure in the classroom. He was a plump and jovial bloke whom I met on Thursday in his big open plan workroom.

My task that morning was to take overhead projector acetates out of their cardboard frames and slip them back into the right place in various folders. The lessons were a mix of medical and clinical stuff which, I assumed, were something to do with the CMT3 course recently completed by Jee Troop: anatomy diagrams (which I knew from college); medical equipment and tubes (which I knew from Portex); etc.

FC was much more interesting than the work he gave me. He was a corporal on the run from the Screaming Skull: his annual fitness test was months overdue and the SS had made it his Command Task to hunt the man down and force him to complete the requirement. This meant that any time someone came to the door, FC would duck and hide behind piles of files; I was under strict instructions to tell people that he had popped out for a few minutes, and ask if they would like to leave a message?

Between bouts of peek-a-boo, FC regaled me with stories of his less-than-illustrious career to date. The man was good mates with LCpl O; he hinted that the two of them were in competition to see who could get the most demotions in one career. LCpl O was currently in

the lead - something to do with painting a statue's boots red. It all seemed a bit stupid to me, but I made an effort to show interest - proving that my barman skills had not deteriorated during basic training.

Sadly, I was too efficient. I completed what was supposed to be an all-day job in a couple of hours, meaning that after lunch I was back in the Admin Block corridor admiring the paint on the walls between the doors.

Even though I was no longer wearing red flags in my uniform lapels, I wasn't given a chance to shirk barrack routine in the evenings, or dodge out of any beatings. People seemed to treat me like nothing had changed.

"Have you seen the TTO yet?" asked New Corporal. He was wondering around with a clipboard, chasing up people who had not yet had the pleasure of discussing their future trade with the stout Colonel.

"Yes, Corporal!"

"Then why's your name not ticked off?"

"Don't know, Corporal!"

"... You don't know? When did you see him?"

"Day Nine, Corporal"

"Day ... Nine?"

"Yes, Corporal. Permission to carry on?"

"You saw the TTO on Day Nine?"

"Yes, Corporal. It's why I PVRd. Permission to carry on?"

I could tell NC wanted to continue the conversation, but time was pressing and he had other recruits to chase up. "Fuck off, Roots," he said, finally - an order I was more than happy to comply with.

Midweek was the time of the Great Shift. Jee Troop moved out of our Block; we moved up a floor. This made me happy because the broken light switch in my room was beginning to really piss me off.

Nobody had bothered to come around to fix it. Instead, to get through unexpected inspections, the Two Daves had gathered all the pieces and put them back together like a jigsaw puzzle. Everything fitted perfectly; you needed to look really closely to see the cracks between the shards. And the switch still worked - if you pressed it in the right place. Press too hard, however, and the whole thing fell apart again.

In my new room I took the bed on constant display to everyone walking past along the corridor - which was Carl's position in our old room. I didn't enjoy being so visible, but at least I didn't have to worry about fucking light switches.

The other downside of moving was that I got separated from the Two Daves. My new roommates turned out to be a Jee Trooper who had been back-squadded - I never discovered the reason why - and one of the Irish lads from 3 Section. We soon settled in together, but I missed the way Dave the Para would try to smother me with a pillow during the night (because, apparently: snoring).

When I heard the news that Carl was to be back-squadded, due to his continuing spine problems, I took him downstairs for a consolation ciggie. For once, we managed to choose a time when nobody else was around the ashtray bin lids, giving us some peace and space to chat about stuff like Carl's plans for Christmas leave.

We were disturbed by a Jee Trooper - a lad slightly taller than me, with a good sprinkling of acne across his face - who bashed through the ground floor corridor doors still in his uniform and walked straight up to my face.

"You Roots?" he demanded.

I admitted to owning the name.

"You PVRd?"

"... Yeah?"

He stared straight into my eyes for a couple of seconds, then: "You IDIOT!"

He broke away, started heading for the stairs.

"Fucking IDIOT!"

I exchanged a sidelong glance with Carl; he looked as astonished as I felt. The man wheeled before he reached the first step and marched back into my face: "IDIOT!"

I said nothing. As he turned away again, Carl offered me a raised eyebrow; I returned the signal with one of my patented '*not a fucking clue*' expressions. We both settled in to watch the show as the man completed a second circuit of the space: "You FUCKING IDIOT!"

After a third lap, he headed outdoors, volleying me a final, muffled "IDIOT!" through the window. We both remembered our ciggies at the same time, took a coordinated toke from them.

"Who was that?" I asked, finally.

"He's so-and-so, yeah?" said Carl. "He's gonna be Best Soldier when Jee Troop pass out."

"Oh ... okay."

We pulled a final lung of smoke together, stubbed out the dog ends and ambled back upstairs to carry on with stuff.

Fri 16 Dec: Day 47

0745-0900 - POP rehearsal
0905-1030 - Prepare for POP
1100-1225 - Jee Troop POP
1345-1640 - TTO interviews / TP Comds disposal

Brrr! Brrr!

I looked at the other Gang members: "That's the second time it's rung."

"Don't answer it!" said Blond Flat-top Lad.

"But it's a phone. What if it's something important?"

"It's the NCO's phone. We're not to answer it. Ever!" said Newcastle Lad.

"Orders," agreed Edinburgh Guy.

Brrr! Brrr!

There was no NCOs, or Officers, around. Everyone was outside watching Jee Troop get ready for their Passing Off Parade. We had been outside, too, earlier that morning, helping to direct proud parents and girlfriends from the visitor's car park to wherever they were going to sit and watch the marching show. The military band - borrowed from another regiment because the RAMC didn't do musicians - had turned up in a big luxury coach. Then we had been told to fuck off because we weren't good enough to watch real soldiers strut their marching stuff.

... Which, as far as I was concerned, was fair enough.

Brrr! Brrr!

I walked into the NCO's office and picked up the phone.

"Who's that?"

"Pte Roots."

"Why have you answered the phone, Roots?"

"Because it was ringing, Corporal!" For it was Spooky Corporal's voice at the other end of the line.

<silence>

"Report to the Guardroom, Roots. I don't have time for this shit!"

"Corporal!"

The phone line went dead; I placed the handset back on its cradle.

"I gotta go to the Guardroom," I told the others.

"Fucking told you!" said EG, ever helpful.

I shrugged my shoulders, headed for the stairwell. Even a beasting in the Guardroom would be more fun than standing around a corridor with fuck all else to do.

"Why are you here?"

"Orders, Sir!" I told the Warrant Officer at the Guardroom window.

"Who?"

"Spooky Corporal, Sir!"

The WO was checking through papers while we spoke. He had the look about him of a man who didn't have time for this shit.

"Why?"

"To help out, Sir?" I guessed.

It was a good guess. I got ordered to run along to the point where barrier tape had been strung across the road. When the Senior Brass's chauffeur-driven car arrived I was to let it through. Senior Brass got his own parking space close to the Parade Ground, to save him having to walk too far.

Soon enough a very posh car with pretty flags attached to the bonnet drew up beside me. I lifted the tape with my left arm, saluted with my right. The car glided under the barrier, then stopped again. There was a second tape barrier; I sprinted past the car and repeated the operation, this time getting the salute perfect.

Once the car had turned the corner I relaxed into an at ease, closed my eyes and listened to the chirruping of the birds, soon accompanied by the echoes of the military band playing some jaunty military tune.

Time moved on. I was happy standing in the middle of the road, alone, doing nothing. The peace I felt within me was intoxicating.

"ROOTS!"

... *Oh, joy!* Short Shouty Corporal was back in my life.

"Corporal!"

"Why the fuck are you standing there doing fuck all?"

"Orders, Corporal!"

"I've got new orders for you, Roots!" SSC sounded a bit too happy about this. "Tidy up all this shit. Roll all the tape up neatly, then report back to the Guardroom."

"Corporal!"

"Oh, and if the Troops march back while you're still doing that, you will stand to attention and fucking salute them, you understand?"

"Yes, Corporal!"

"You, Roots, are scum. They are soldiers. You will give them the fucking respect they deserve!"

"Corporal!"

"Well, carry the fuck on!"

I carried the fuck on, starting the work of disentangling the reams of plastic barrier tape from branches and bushes and winding it into a couple of very neat, tight rolls, ready for reuse. When Jee Troop and Home Troop marched past me, following the band, I stood to attention and saluted every single one of my mates. "What the fuck you playing at," some shouted at me as they clipped past. "Why the fuck are you saluting?"

I didn't answer them. I kept my hand at my brow until the last of them had jeered past me, then I got on with the job of rolling the tape up.

If SSC's plan had been to make me feel like the complete twat, it failed. I was proud to salute my mates. If they didn't like it - fuck 'em!

The tape work took a while longer; I made sure to do the job properly - I, too, still had some pride in me.

I was back at the Guardroom within an hour. The Warrant Officer was behind his desk now; SSC was missing from the scene, which gave me hope. I handed the tape rolls over, watched as WO briefly inspected them, then threw them in the bin.

I spotted Boxer Bloke, gave him a smile.

"I bet you can't do as many push-ups as our prisoner."

"I bet you're right, Sir. But I know I can do more sit-ups than him."

<silence>

"You got further orders?"

"Report back to the Admin Block, Sir." I lied.

<more silence>

"Piss off, then."

"Sir!" ... and I was gone!

Sat 17 - Sun 18 Dec: Days 48-49

0745 onwards - Ex Final Fling

We watched Home Troop march off into the woods, before we marched ourselves to the Admin Block. It was a weekend; nobody had any tasks for the Gang of Four to perform. We stood and chatted. When nobody was looking we sat and chatted.

Saturday evening, I spent on my own - the first extended alone time I had experienced in almost seven weeks. I explored the top floor utility rooms; discovered a bath. I wallowed in hot bath water for over an hour. The silence was noisy in my ears - the creaks of a near-empty building left to settle into its pipes and joists.

I didn't think about what my mates were getting up to in the woods. I was too busy making plans for a new life in London, fretting I'd never be given a chance to build that new life - there was still no word about my PVR.

Mon 19 Dec: Day 50

0745-0815 - [Inspection] TP staff

0820-0900 - [DRILL 38] Revision

0905-1030 - Return of ex equipment

1100-1225 - [END TRG 7] 3 miles CEFO empty + assault course

1345-1640 - SSMS 100% kit check

Monday the nineteenth of December, nineteen eighty eight - the (second) happiest day of my life.

"It's your lucky day, lads," the Troop Sergeant told us. "You're going home!"

The sweep of elation I felt course through my body - that's a priceless memory!

Within a minute the four of us each had a piece of paper in our hands, with a list of places in the left column of the table printed on it, and orders to complete the form with signatures from each place in the right hand column.

I was away like a hare in March! I went to each place, found someone who answered to Staff or Sir and got their autograph.

In the Post Room I had to fill out a forwarding address card. I gave my Mum's address, though I had no intention whatsoever of moving back to Dymchurch. The life I now wanted was entirely London!

Forms completed, the next step was for us to return all our kit. In a repeat of Day 1, I teamed up with Edinburgh Guy to cart our mattresses, bedding and uniforms from the Accommodation Block to the QM Block. I was tempted to claim that I'd lost one of my cap badges, but in the end decided against it. The only things I kept were my tracksuit (which I'd paid for), my twists (paid for), my Reebok trainers (on my feet) and my blue ribbon flags.

I donated my wooden coathangers to whoever wanted them by leaving them hanging in the wash-and-dry room, alongside my ironing board which I really couldn't be arsed to carry around with me anymore.

"Pte ROOTS! To ME! NOW!"

I was walking back to the Admin block, dressed in civvies with my black holdall over my shoulder, when the shout came.

"Sir!" I responded, then trotted towards the Screaming Skull and his Sergeant sidekick.

The man did not look happy.

"There's a broken light switch in your room."

"Sir!"

"I've spoken to Pte Dave and Pte Other Dave. They say that you broke it. Is that true?"

"Yes, Sir!"

<silence>

"Why did you break the light switch?"

"It broke, Sir, when I went to switch it off."

"It just ... broke?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"When did this happen?"

"Last Monday, Sir!"

"Why didn't you report it?"

"I did, Sir!"

"There's no report of a broken light switch in that room, Private. Are you saying now that you did report it?"

"I - I thought I did report it, Sir! I don't remember clearly what happened last Monday."

"Why not?"

"I damaged myself playing rugby, Sir! I was on Sick Parade Monday and Tuesday. I was in a lot of pain!"

<more silence>

The man didn't shout at me. He didn't even raise his voice. Instead he turned to the sergeant stood next to him and, in a very calm voice, said:

"Charge him. Damaging Government property."

And then, in step, they walked away.

Major M interviewed us, as before, in alphabetical order.

"You've been with us for 50 days."

"Yes, Sir!"

"And you want to leave because?"

"I'm unhappy with the Army way of life, Sir."

"Is there anything in particular that makes you unhappy?"

"I want to pursue other opportunities, Sir, back in the real world."

"I'm looking through your record ... I can see no issues here. You've made no complaints. The training staff are very pleased with your progress. Your conduct has been ... exemplary."

<silence>

"You're currently ... let me just check ... second in the Troop rankings."

"Sir!" This was news to me.

"Everything I see here tells me you have an excellent career ahead of you. Are you completely certain that you want to leave now?"

"Yes, Sir!"

The man did try his best, but it all seemed a bit late in the day to me. Why leave this chat to the very last minute?

A few more questions, interspersed with awkward silences. Then he signed a piece of paper and handed it to me, wishing me all the best for the future as he did so.

... And there it was, finally - my Discharge certificate! I still have it to this day.

The only other person to say goodbye was, surprisingly, LCpl O.

We - the Gang of Four - were on our way to the main gates when he pulled up alongside us in an Army jeep, jumped out, strode up to me and gave me a big hug.

"So you're finally out?"

"Yes, Corporal!"

"Well, you look after yourself out there. Remember, us Southerners have to look out for each other!"

"Corporal!" I didn't know what else to say to the man. It was a strange farewell. I was just glad that he seemed so happy to see us walking away.

We went to the Guardroom and signed out for the last time. We stepped past the vehicle barrier, then through the big sliding metal gate. We strode along the road that would lead us to Ash Vale station.

... It was too much: I couldn't contain myself any longer.

"FREEDOM!!!"

"For fuck's sake!" said Edinburgh Guy. "Shut up!"

"Why?"

"We're not free yet, man. Not until midnight!"

"What are you saying?"

"What I'm saying," he said, grabbing me by the head, "is they can still take you back there and fucking Charge you!"

"... Fuck off! Really?"

"Yeah, really! So shut the fuck up and start walking!"

The man still had more fucking clues than me. I did as he told me.

We walked past Mychett Lake, onto the main road and along to the station. We handed in our travel warrants, in turn, and got our tickets to wherever. We climbed the steps to the platform. We waited for the train, chatting about fast food.

When the train arrived I took a long look along the platform, just in case, before stepping into the carriage.

The platform remained empty. I closed the door. The train moved.

... And life went on.

Aftermath

19 December 1988 was the day I moved to London. My stay with my sister in a flat on the Cathall Road Estate (so good they demolished it twice!) was supposed to be temporary but ended up lasting 2 years.

I shared a small, windowless utility room (bereft of utilities) with one - sometimes two - other men. There was damp on the walls and rats in the ventilation. My wardrobe and chest of drawers was the same black, drumlike holdall I had bought to transport my worldly goods to basic training. Still, it was warm and located on the dry side of a lockable front door, thus good enough.

I spent a few days over Christmas with my Mum and family in Dymchurch. My bed there was laundered and comfortable; I rejected it, returned with my sister to Leytonstone. I might have failed at the Army thing. I refused point blank to fail at London.

The homesickness hit me in the first week of January. I woke up one morning feeling so gut-sick and sad and lonely I burst into tears. The need to be back home was ... visceral, immediate. Overwhelming.

... But home was not London, or Dymchurch. Home was Keogh Barracks. I was homesick for the fucking Army!

I had never felt homesick before, nor have I really suffered it since; I am (mostly) unsentimental about places and don't get much attached to them. Before 1989 I didn't understand why people made such a song-and-dance about how they were feeling homesick - I certainly wasted no sympathy on college acquaintances going through their petty little woe-is-me dramas.

I was disabled for the best part of a fortnight. The mornings were the worst, to wake up in that horrid room and realise, in the darkness, that this was not my billet. Most days I managed to ride the grief-waves, haul myself out of bed and into some clothes. Other days - that didn't happen; on those days all I could do was curl up in a ball of pain and bury myself in sheets.

Nights followed days. One morning I woke up numb; a few days later it happened again - those were happy occasions.

January became February and my dislike of that utility room, the flat - the people my sister invited in to share the space with us - drove me outside to stalk the streets and suburbs of this new, cold, unending city.

I went job hunting. I applied for lab work, for office work. Anything except labouring on building sites - because those jobs would mean having to be grateful to whichever of my sister's boyfriends had offered me the work that day.

Going from interview to interview, I started to learn London; learn how to behave like a grown-up citizen.

My dream job was to be a live-in barman. I had a whole week's experience of working in a pub so didn't think I was aiming too high. I did a few shifts here and there, almost landed a couple of the jobs I went for. I didn't give a shit about the pitiful wages: what I ached for was a room to sleep in that came fitted with a window.

A week after Valentines I got turned down for a live-in job near Wembley. That same day I got an offer to join the Department of Transport as an Admin Assistant, working in Whitehall. An hour later a woman phoned to offer me a position in a microbiology lab in Harley Street, testing samples of piss and shit. That was my first Good Day of the year - I didn't have to force the smile onto my face, it just sort of appeared there before I could stop it.

The homesickness was still happening, but not so often. It came in bouts of woe, usually before lunch. I learned to operate the machinery of my limbs and flesh and personality in a way that would bury what I felt deep inside my guts and eyes, where nobody could spot it.

By the time I stepped out of Pimlico tube station to start my new Civil Service career (the day after April Fool's) I was passably human again, almost civilian.

The Honourable Artillery Company

One August workday later that year I decided to have a sandwich lunch outside in the sunshine. As I was walking past the local Territorial Army centre I noticed its doors were open. A poster on the front railings was advertising an Open Day - come in and learn all about the TA.

I hadn't suffered a bout of homesickness for weeks, so the wave of sadness and loss that suddenly rose up from my belly took me by surprise. Not that it lasted long; I had developed

some coping strategies by this time - one of which was to refuse to be immobilised, to go do something unexpected.

I walked through the door and scanned the space within for lurking recruiters. I was in luck: the ones I spotted were all engaged in chat. I plotted a route to a display of pamphlets, took action, then walked swiftly back out, hurriedly passing an unnoticed recruiter loitering near the door without making eye contact.

The brochure - expensively glossy - turned out to be for an outfit calling themselves the Honourable Artillery Company. I had never heard of them before, but they seemed to be something to do with the City of London and claimed to be one of the oldest surviving military units in Britain. Photos showed groups of soldiers in bright uniforms firing cannons over the Thames, alongside some generic shots of camouflaged soldiers smiling at the camera from their shallow, damp trenches.

A loose sheet of paper inside the brochure advertised an Open Evening at the start of September for prospective recruits, taking place in a posh building near the City called Armoury House.

I had plenty of time to consider the question: did I still want some sort of military action in my life? I knew I was becoming unfit (my few attempts at jogging hadn't been sustained) and my alcohol intake was beginning to worry me. At least this time I knew what I was letting myself in for - and I knew that I had nothing to fear from the discipline: Major M had told me I was second in the Troop rankings when he Discharged me, so I couldn't have been that much of a fuck-up as a soldier.

I went to the Open Evening, admired the building's architecture, met some people in khaki kit and non-standard-issue boots, asked appropriate questions, filled out some forms. Soon enough I got a letter through the post inviting me to attend their Autumn Selection Weekend.

... No strings, I thought. No commitments - just a pleasant couple of days in the countryside reliving some old dreams. It could even be fun!

Early one Friday evening I joined a couple of dozen other young men in a large hall in Armoury House. After registering and filling out some forms we were taken outside to a coach and driven to a place deep in the countryside called Bisley.

During the journey I made a deliberate effort to chat to some of the other lads. Many of them had jobs in the City, I learned, which automatically made me feel like a pauper among princes. Still, I was a Civil Servant now and thus worth the effort of being networked - just in case I turned into a Useful Contact at some point in the distant future.

We arrived at our destination, settled ourselves into our temporary billets (I built a bed block straight away, having remembered to pack a tape measure with me) before going downstairs for briefing and more form filling.

Before the briefing I was still a bit hazy about what the HAC got up to; after the briefing I was stunned.

Yes, there were drummers and ceremonial soldiers who went around firing big guns to mark important occasions. Operationally, however, the HAC had a special role called Surveillance and Target Acquisition: going behind Enemy Lines, survival in hostile territory - proper scary Action Man stuff. If any of us could demonstrate we had the physical, mental and emotional strength to handle that sort of work, then that's what they would train us to do.

... *The fuck!?*

Saturday - I don't remember much of the morning activities. I would guess it was the normal Selection Centre stuff around health checks, group activities, team working skills, fact retention skills, etc, etc.

The afternoon remains seared in my memory to this day. Physical tests. The run was timed, and much longer than I was expecting. There was a big obstacle course we had to tackle. On the way back - again, running - we broke off for a session of piggyback races.

I had done no preparation whatsoever for this level of physical activity. The afternoon was uncommonly hot for that time of year. And the NCOs guiding us through this madness hadn't packed enough water. By the time we arrived back at our accommodation - I was trailing the others quite badly at this point - I was past the verge of heatstroke.

Somebody sat me down in the shade. Somebody else asked me some questions along the lines of 'what day is it today' and 'how many fingers am I holding up'. Another person hauled me to my feet and led me to the changing rooms, stripped me naked and stood me under a cold shower - I must have been there for a good half hour, occasionally lifting my head and opening my mouth to let the sweet droplets rain into my throat.

I had a quick kip before heading back to the main hall. The other lads in my team were planning the skit (a 5 minute performance, preferably comic) we would perform after the Big Dinner - suit and tie job! - that evening. I forced myself to contribute.

Say anything you like about the HAC, but the food I ate during that entire weekend was both edible and tasty. The Big Dinner was sumptuous and came with beer and wine. Our skit was ruined by the fact that we performed second-last and two other teams had already performed the exact same skit (aircraft with engines on fire, culminating with water being thrown over the NCO playing the part of the left engine).

I slept well that night, had no problems with waking up early for the Sunday activities. More exercises, more activities, probably an interview or two with an NCO and/or an Officer. By late-afternoon we were on the bus heading back to London.

As we were travelling the NCO who had been looking after my team sat down next to me.

"Richard Roots, yes?" I admitted to my name. "It's bad news unfortunately. You failed the physical part of the tests."

"Oh - okay." I had been expecting this news: the demonstrated fact of my unfitness has been a nasty wake-up call, knocking my self confidence quite badly.

"However, we were happy with everything else you did this weekend. And we like what we've learned about your previous service with the Medics. If we can get your fitness up to the required standards, then we'd be happy to offer you a place in our ranks."

... Again: the fuck!?

"O-kay," I said, trying to sound professional while keeping the astonishment away from my face. "So if I go away for a few months and put the hard work in, I can do the Selection Weekend again?"

"Definitely an option," the man confirmed. "Or, we can enlist you now and work on your fitness back at base. Is that something you'd be willing to do?"

For once, I took some seconds to think about my answer. The offer was there! What was suddenly missing, I realised, was that core belief in my physical abilities to become the green-eyed super-warrior they had told us about at the Friday evening briefing.

"I think I'd prefer to go away and do the hard work myself," I finally told him. "I need to prove to myself I can do it. When will the next Weekend be?"

He gave me a small smile. "Springtime," he told me. "I'll make sure we send you an invite. Maybe you'll be able to search out a better quality suit by then?"

I never made it to the HAC Spring Selection Weekend.

Over that winter I came to terms with London, found new things to do (poetry workshops) and discovered new friends (poets). Work improved with promotion: I learned how to survive the office politics, how to grab opportunities for more 'fun' jobs. I discovered better quality pubs to drink in. I was still lonely a lot of the time, but no longer lost.

I did lose my virginity - and didn't have to pay for the privilege. The person who took it came equipped with a penis, which widened more than just my eyes.

I stopped feeling homesick for the Army. When the HAC invitation letter arrived, I found I had no desire in me anymore to be a soldier. I wrote back and thanked them for their time - but no thanks.

... And life went on.

Ghosts

I started this account as a memory exercise - something only I would read, or care about. Somewhere along the way I decided to write up my notes as a memoir - either to share with (interested) Facebook Friends on an invite-only basis, or maybe self-published in a very quiet way so the occasional stranger could read about this weird bloke who managed to fuck up a promising military career without even trying that hard.

To publish a memoir is a risky thing. For a start, it opens the writer up to ridicule (for getting basic stuff they should know wrong) and misinterpretation - usually because the writer has failed to show the story they are trying to convey in a detailed yet interesting way.

There's also the risk that people the writer mentions in the memoir might come across the account and read it. People who remember events very differently; people who might have evidence to disprove some of the assertions made by the writer - and may have the means and ability to prosecute the writer for (what they consider to be) libellous content in the work.

When I settled on the decision to publish, I immediately felt an urge to edit the work. The first things to change/camouflage were the names - even though I know it won't take someone who was there, who shared my experiences, long to work out the identities of the people I've written about.

Next up: dialogue. I don't remember much of what people actually said to me, or me to them, so most of that was heading-towards-fiction already - though always with a kernel of honesty buried in the exchange. The biggest change I made was to remove most of the profanity (seriously!) just in case my Mother decides to read this account.

Scene ordering - I couldn't do much about. I was working within the strict confinements of the timetable. The story arc is what it is, within reason ... however, I do have to admit to some - finessing, let's say - of the events in the timetable.

Some of the bigger events - I can't determine on which exact day they took place. I was Charged for not shaving by the Screaming Skull, but I don't know on which one of his Inspections I fucked up. Similarly with the two Stand-at-Attention-in-the-Corridor incidents (one removed in the final edit because: boring): they happened, but I don't know when they happened. Other examples include: Dave the Para going AWOL; my 24hrs Stag Duty; and the day I denied, in front of the entire Troop, that I no longer wanted to PVR.

I can live with my drafting decisions. I doubt if anyone who was there will ever read this account, so any timing errors I've made will solidify into 'facts' soon enough.

Finally, I have made an effort to interrogate the text to purge it of fantasy elements: stuff I included in good faith in the first few drafts but which, on reflection, don't feel as - well, as honest - as they ought to be.

I've kept the memoir as close to the truth as I can; it's not my fault if my life sometimes reads like a poorly scripted soap opera. Thus when I claim the Screaming Skull tried to have me Charged an hour before my discharge - this happened. I'm not making it up.

... But even with all that effort, this account is not the entire 'Real Rik' truth. Because no memoir can ever be completely true.

The problem is the narrator/actor thing. The Rik (me) I describe in my life story - let's call him Naive Rik, the one wearing the boots - is not the same as the Rik (also me) narrating the story. Cynical Rik is 30 years older, with a fuckload of hindsight and no defence of naivety available to him. CR has had to put words and emotions into NR's mouth and flesh, animate him for your reading pleasure because NR can't do it himself.

Naive Rik, you see, died a long time ago. He is a ghost to me: I can see his fog, taste him, get angry for (or at) him ... but I cannot ever be him again.

If NR had written this memoir - if the fucking bastard had kept a fucking diary, or at least scribbled some notes and thoughts on the sodding timetable - I suspect the result would have been very different. A lot more defensive for a start, littered with manufactured mitigations and trite self-justifications.

I remember NR as quietly whiny, prematurely judgmental, thoughtless about other people's feelings, more willing to dish it out than take it. Needy to a fault at times. He was also very good at stubbornly shoving his head up his own arse when it served his selfish needs.

... Yeah. Cynical Rik (still me) doesn't much like Naive Rik (not me anymore). I'm glad he's dead, and look forward to the moment when I can finally push the 'publish' button on this memoir and get on with exorcising his clingy, self-pitying presence from between my ears for another decade or so.

I have no photos of me in uniform, or of me at Keogh Barracks. I've never liked having my photo taken - another relic phobia I suppose I ought to sort out when I get the time.

I do remember Short Shouty Corporal wandering around with a big, blocky video camera while we were doing stuff. Jee Troop got to watch a video of their basic training experience on the day they Passed Off, and I think they - or family members at the Parade - were able to buy copies of the video as a keepsake of their time at Keogh.

I wouldn't be surprised if the same thing happened for Home Troop - which means there may be a video still out there, hidden in a box in an attic somewhere, containing brief clips of me in the background trying to fit into the regime.

Part of me wants to see that video. Part of me doesn't. Dilemmas, eh?

I've never been very good with keeping in touch with people. Nowadays that's not so much of a problem - social media solves far more problems than it creates. There's groups on Facebook dedicated to military stuff, and the group admins have been kind enough to let me (silently) haunt a group for RAMC folks - not that I recognise anyone there (because: the P Thing + I've forgotten most people's names).

Beyond that, the Corps has come back to haunt me just three times in the past 30 years. So I might as well conclude this memoir with those three memories.

The first took place in 1990. I was working in Monck St (next to Marsham St, at that time 'the ugliest building in London') and my morning commute involved a tube ride to Pimlico, then a nice stroll past the Tate Gallery (the original one) to my office.

One morning I was pulled out of my ambling thoughts by a man walking ahead of me. I observed him - his shape and proportions, his hairstyle, the way he walked. And I knew, with an intense certainty, who that man was: Sgt (formerly Cpl) W!

People with congenital prosopagnosia, like me, are extremely bad at recognising people just by looking at their faces. So instead we develop coping mechanisms - we pull together a whole set of other attributes to help us with the identification stuff. My way of recognising people is primarily by voice, backed up by their walking gait, their body shapes, their hair style, and their fashion choices (in that order).

I had marched behind Sgt W for long enough to lodge an imprint of his essential non-facial characteristics in my memory, and the experience of him had been intense enough to keep that impression there for more than a year. All I needed to confirm the identification was the sound of his voice.

I should have called out to the man, introduced myself, see if my gut certainty was correct ...

But I didn't. Too often in the past I had made the mistake of thinking a stranger was someone I knew. Those conversations tended to turn fraught - occasionally confrontational - pretty quickly. So I didn't shout out, not even when he turned to enter the RAMC building sat next to the Tate Gallery.

... I regret that now. I don't regret much about my Army experiences, but I wish I had called out that day, taken the risk. It would have been good to talk to him again, make the effort to thank him for giving me the opportunity to Grow The Fuck Up - because I did more growing up in those seven weeks of basic training than I had managed myself in the previous seven years.

If you ever read this, Sgt/Cpl W: thank you for helping me to Grow The Fuck Up!

The second occasion was a perfect example of prosopagnosia-in-action. I calculate that it took place in spring or summer of 1993 because it was a nice day and I was walking back to my office-at-the-time in Marsham Street, after spending my lunch hour wandering around one of the Royal Parks.

"Roots! ROOTS!"

Out of nowhere, someone was shouting my name. I looked around and saw three men, dressed in suits and walking in-step, rapidly closing in on me.

"Roots! Look at you! How have you been, man?"

Well I was doing okay until a complete stranger started screaming out my name in the middle of a fucking park. I went into my let's-find-out-who-you-are operational mode and admitted to being fine. How are you? Going anywhere interesting? ... etc. Questions designed to gather information while not giving away the fact that I had no clue who I was talking to.

I managed to stretch out the conversation for at least 3 minutes before the man who had been shouting my name twigged the ruse.

"You don't know who the fuck I am, do you?" he accused, eyes angry at the fact of my disgusting failure.

Back in those days, when caught out in such situations, I would never admit my fault. The man listened to my ramblings with a growing look of contempt in his face.

"Gotta be going. Have a nice life, Roots!" ... and with that the chance encounter was over, the three men walking (in-step) into the distance while I continued to stand there, bemused.

I still wonder, on occasion, about who that person was. I assume he had a good opinion of me before that meeting, and part of me feels sad (apologetic, even) that some unfathomable, unfixable fault in the wiring between my eyes and my memories may, on that day, have tainted whatever stories he had built around us between our first and final meetings.

... But I can't fix the past. All I can do is try to accept it for what it really was, not what I daydream it might have become. Dreams are for poets, as they say.

The last incident was much happier. A few years back I was sat at my computer idling some time on Facebook when I noticed I had a new Friend request from somebody calling themselves 'Stumpy'.

Now I've never known a Stumpy but it was a weekend and I wasn't planning on doing much so instead of automatically deleting the request I clicked on the link to check out the bloke's profile ...

... and there he was! Carl! My Best Buddy from that time when I was in the Army!

I spent that afternoon in a sudden flood of memories - I hadn't thought about my Army days in years. And along with the memories came a sudden bout of homesickness. It took me

a few hours to process it all, do the proper thing and Grow The Fuck Up just a little bit more, click on the 'Accept Request' button.

Carl was doing well. He got through basic training in spite of the Cursed Room and his bruised spine, and had made a decent stab at his career as a CMT with one of the Field Ambulances. He was still mad for the Ska and still had a massive passion for All Things Moped.

He had some surprisingly nice memories of me, particularly our Weekend Leave where I got to meet his family. And I was really happy to be reminded of our time together in Keogh - a place in my life which, at that time, had become little more than an unlikely fantasy to me.

Sadly, we've lost touch again. I think his profile got closed down when Facebook decided to purge people who were not using their real names - the Bastards! I've searched for him, but no luck.

I hope he's still okay, still enjoying life in Cornwall. He was definitely the best mate a naive twat like me could ever hope for in such extraordinary circumstances. Cheers for reminding me of us, Carl!

... and life goes on.

Afterword

It turns out that the new General Data Protection Regulation (2018) now gives me access to lots of personal data held on me by third parties, including the Ministry of Defence. I found a form on their website which you can download and fill out requesting your data. The website claims the data will be supplied, if it still exists, in 3-4 months - free of charge.

I always like the phrase: 'free of charge'.

I completed the form at the end of August and emailed it off. Copies of my records were sent back just before Christmas - just inside their advertised turnaround target.

Below, key dates, key scores, and interview write-ups - alongside my own personal observations some 30 years later.

Key dates:

15 June 1988 [est] - First walked into Army Careers Information Office
5 July 1988 - Application form signed
19 July 1988 - Medical examination date

19 July 1988 - Report by Army recruiter
20 July 1988 - Recommendation by Army Careers Officer
27 July 1988 - Personal summary form signed
11-12 August 1988 - Attended Selection Centre
[5 September 1988 first Monday 3 weeks after SC - Jee Troop start date?]
24 October 1988 - Enlistment date
31 October 1988 - Joined Unit
10 November 1988 - Army Form B132A [Application for PVR] signed
17 November 1988 - Army Form B132 [Authority for soldier's PVR] signed
19 December 1988 - Discharge date

Personal observations on key dates (Dec 2018)

I don't care what anyone else says: this was a bloody fast recruitment process - was it purely down to my age and academic qualifications? The records all insist that I started basic training on 31 October - no mention about starting in September, but I remember the Selection Centre Colonel's words precisely about me starting "in 3 weeks time." Also, my PVR request was processed and confirmed in November - Major M could have discharged me at any point after 17 November (I assume).

Key scores:

PULHHEEMS - P2 [basically: fit for everything] - PES: FE

AET86 Ability level - P[roblems]50, I[nstructions]54, D[ominoes]52, V[erbal]100, A[rithmetic]74, TSG=5, SSG=1, AP1=32, AP2=42

PQAS - Recruiter's Gradings - TP=5, A=4, CS=3, SS=4, DB=3, T=3
PQAS Total - 22 [out of 36, I think]

Combat Temperament Assessment - Adequate
PSO rating - C
Potential NCO - Adequate
Potential Officer - No

Personal observations on key scores (Dec 2018)

I can see nothing in my scores which would indicate an accelerated enlistment was justified - unless the need for RAMC Combat Medical Technicians was so acute that fast tracking my application made sense to people at the time. (PSO rating C means - I think - that anyone with an A or B rating should have jumped ahead of me in the queue for call-up).

No mention of me becoming a radiographer either - throughout the process/interviews I was adamant that I wanted to be a CMT.

Also, Cpl W's assertion on Day 1 of basic training - that I was "Officer material" - is not supported by the Selection Centre's assessment; he must have meant Non-Commissioned

Officer - or it was just one of those basic training choreography things to single out a new recruit for news like that on Day 1, to see how they handle being singled out. Whatever.

Key statements:

5 July 1988 - Application form - your reasons for application:

"I want a job that offers more of a challenge to me than my current job, with good prospects of advancing my career and sporting ability, and which offers good prospects for my future employment. I believe the Army offers all of this."

5 July 1988 - Application form - Army employment preferences:

- Combat Medical Technician (Royal Army Medical Corps)
- Staff Clerk (Royal Army Ordnance Corps)

Personal observations on application form (Dec 2018)

I had completely forgotten that my second choice preference had been for a clerical admin role - ironic, I suppose, given my later Civil Service career. Note: after finding out this fact (and getting confirmation on dates and stuff) I went back and corrected the copy I had already written about my recruitment. And corrected my memories, of course.

19 July 1988 - Report by Army Recruiter

A young man of average height and build, very pleasant to talk to and responded well during his interview. Lives at home with mum and two elder brothers, shares bedroom, father deceased 82, parents had divorced before this and Richard saw father every day and his death from cancer upset him a lot. Good family relationship all live in a three bedroom terr house in a small seaside village, all support his application.

Attended a mxd secondary school, sat several CSEs, O and A levels good grades, favourite subjects, science & English disliked geog. No problems at school attendance and discipline good, took part in all school activities and sports had a trial for Shepway, 100/200 & long jump. Went onto Tech school sitting his B TEC gaining some good grades enjoyed Tech and had a good relationship with his peers and other students, while at Tech stayed in a bed and breakfast.

Left Tech age 20 and started work as a microbiology tech, enjoys the work but not the lab confinements good relationship with all at work supported by good 484s. Pay £360 pm, outgoings £90 for keep, £25 to mum clothing club (£55) outstanding, £35 bank loan for a holiday £230 outstanding, the rest on social pleasure, has a good circle of friends enjoys discos and drinks lager/bitter, other interest reading (science fiction). No regular girlfriend, no police problems and has strong views on the use of drugs or solvent abuse, a poor swimmer not confident in water, goes jogging at least 3 times a week.

Richard is a good applicant, needs to be a bit more positive and confident in his own ability, wants RAMC CMT and could be underselling himself I believe that the PSO RAMC could convince him of other opportunities on offer, but RAMC is the way he wants to go, could find training a bit of a problem but should get through and make a good future soldier. RECOMMENDED.

Personal observations on recruiter's report (Dec 2018)

Not a bad summary of the Rik Persona v1.0. During the interview I must have, let's say, 'embellished' my experiences of college. Also, I have no idea if my family supported my application: I never bothered to ask them about it.

20 July 1988 - Recommendation by Army Careers Officer

A well educated, bright 23 1/2 yr old works wants RAMC and CMT. A mature and sensible applicant who lacks self-confidence, as with his training background he should be capable of working in Environmental Health field. A good sports player who seeks more of a challenge in the working day, currently employed as Lab Tech - Microbiology. Should accept training. Recommended.

Personal observations on ACO's recommendation (Dec 2018)

The only word that jarred when I read the above paragraph was 'mature' - beyond my physical age, I don't think I was any more mature than most of my Home Troop teammates. The other thing that surprised me was the date - a day after the recruiter interview - which meant I had to visit the Army Careers Office 2 days in a row. I thought the interviews were more spaced out.

12 August 1988 - Personnel Selection Officer's Report

Richard is coming up for 24 years of age, of medium height, and build, and I think I expected a sharper, keener person after reviewing his impressive qualifications. He would appear to be healthy and reasonably fit.

He lives with his mother, father died 6 years ago, and 2 of his brothers. He gets along well and Mum supports his application.

He did very well at school obtaining an HNC in applied biology and a string of O levels, 8 at grade C or above. He was on the dole for 12 months after leaving college, but for the last 2 years has worked in the labs of a plastics company.

He used to play a lot of sports and was a sprinter for Folkestone AC. Doesn't do much these days.

He smokes 15-20 cigs per day and drinks in moderation. Admits to having tried marijuana (?) once which made him sick.

The job of Cbt Med Tech appeals to him, and despite his qualifications he is adamant that is what he wants.

He found the discipline here at APSC hard to get used to, and he will therefore find it that much harder at Depot. He wants to join because of the physical side, responsibility and experience and as he says, "It's now or never"

Personal observations on PSO's report (Dec 2018)

Given the trauma of Final Selection, I'm surprised the report is not more negative. Also: note the word 'adamant' in that penultimate paragraph - despite the Colonel trying to persuade me otherwise, I was enlisted as a Combat Medical Technician because I wanted to be a CMT, and nothing else.

Notification of the discharge of a regular recruit

Section B: Cause and analysis of discharge

Cause: at soldier's request free/on payment

Analysis - Army factors: loss of freedom

Analysis - external factors: preferred outside job opportunity

Analysis - personal factors: failure to fit in; changed mind about being a soldier

Observation (a) - ... inadequate briefing at ACIO etc: NO

Observation (b) - ... truth of the reason given etc: YES

Observation (c) - ... recruit would have completed training etc: YES

Observation (d) - Was the recruit allocated to his/her first choice employment: YES

Section C: Suitability for Re-enlistment

Is the recruit suitable for re-enlistment: YES (including 'different Corps/Regiment')

If you recommend re-enlistment, after what period should it be considered:
After 6 months

Section D: Brief history of the case etc

Was re-allocation to another employment considered: YES

Was the recruit counselled and offered the opportunity of re-allocation:
YES

Description of the circumstances leading to the discharge

Pte Roots joined for training with Home Tp on 31 Oct 88. He was a trained microbiology technician with 10 'O' level GCEs and 2 'A' level GCEs who found the discipline required by the Army too much for him. He stayed in training right up to the day of his discharge and would have finished within the top three of his intake had he stayed.

Pte Roots had a brain and thought about training instead of getting on with it. I tried on many occasions to talk him out of leaving but he had made up his mind.

Re-enlistment is recommended.

Personal observations on Major M's discharge notification (Dec 2018)

First off, to be fair to the Major, he completed the notification without full knowledge of the reasons about why I chose to leave. I decided not to tell the man that I was angered by the prospect of being sent to college for two more fucking years when I made the request, and - apart from my one conversation with LCpl O - I never offered that information to any other Officer or NCO.

On "counselled and offered the opportunity of re-allocation" - the trigger for my PVR was the Technical Training Officer telling me I was going to be a radiographer (and 2 more years of fucking college etc), and ordering me to attend interview at Woolwich. This did not (and still does not) constitute an 'offer' in my book; this was forcing me to abandon, against my will, my preferred employment choice of Combat Medical Technician.

On "thought about training instead of getting on with it" - true for the first fortnight of basic training. It took me a week to stop fighting the system and another week to get with the programme. After that, I (mostly) enjoyed basic training and had no problems with 'loss of freedom' etc.

I'm willing to wager hard cash that the number of recruits who don't 'get on with it' ending up 'in the top three' of their intake is ... pretty much zero?

On "many occasions" - if we're talking about (semi-)informal one-on-one chats with the Major ... sorry, but I have no memory whatsoever of those 'many occasions'. I met the man

up-close three times (outside of Pay Parade and Inspection), one of which was when he fined me £20 for not shaving. He never asked me to reconsider my PVR decision (except during my exit interview) - no Officer or NCO ever did. That's why I thought they didn't much care about it.

Finally "re-enlistment" ...

... *The fuck?*

I never knew about this until now (Dec 2018). Nobody ever sat me down and explained to me that even though I had chosen to PVR, the option to re-enlist in the regular Army would be available to me 6 months later - and that I would be welcome to return.

Back in 1989 I honestly believed that crashing out of basic training had killed any future attempt I might have made to rejoin as a full-time professional soldier, that if I wanted some military action in my life then it would have to be through the Territorial Army - with fingers crossed that the Weekend Warriors would be willing to overlook my previous, spectacular failure.

If I had known about the Major's recommendations in 1989 I would definitely have visited an Army Careers Information Office for some advice, rather than (unthinkingly) attempt to join the ranks of the Honourable Artillery Company.

And - considering the tedium of that first Civil Service posting, the loneliness and homesickness following my move to London (and not forgetting the frustrating lack of sex) - I would probably have re-enlisted.

... The British Army dodged a fucking bullet there!

And finally

If you've managed to work your way through this clusterfuck of words that is my memoir - well done! I hope you enjoyed reading about me as much as I've enjoyed remembering me!

And if you really do remember me - if you had to put up with me during those 50 long days of basic training - and you suddenly feel the need to reach out (in greeting or in anger) ... well don't be shy about it!

Folks can always find me in my favourite playground: Facebook. Just search my name, and there I'll be. Feel free to introduce yourself with an appropriate image: something military involving either kittenz or man-eating rabbitz should be fine.

I'm always happy to have my memory corrected on stuff.

You know the drill.

