

Nick Ratnieks CCF recollections

CCF army section weekend camp to Longmoor June 1969

I joined the CCF in September 1968 - by then I was in 3L and I believe that Mr Rees was our form master and my German teacher. Anyhow, all our activity was within the school or near environs until June 1969 when we were shipped off to Longmoor Camp – in the area of the ancient Woolmer Forest near Liphook in North Hampshire.

I do not remember the logistics of our journey - whether we went by train to Liss (most likely) or by truck, which I am sure I would have remembered. However, we got there on a warm and sunny Friday evening and were addressed by the three regular army warrant officers from the Royal Hampshire Regiment who had tutored us over the previous 9 months back at school. Outside our billet, we were informed of certain rules and restrictions to be observed, only one of which remains with me today ie "Do not hang your tool out of the window to take a leak, but go to the ablutions block over there!"

Also present was another platoon of gormless looking youths who spoke with a really thick "Hampshire Hog" burr. We hadn't reckoned on being with others, but this ACF motley crew were from a contingent who were based in Hampshire but whose exact location has been censored [Ed - to protect the Association from howitzers!]. And we were to share the weekend with them!

Many army camps are sited on ground not deemed suitable for agriculture- it had never been farmed, which is partly why areas such as Aldershot, Bordon, Bisley, Pirbright, Chobham and indeed Longmoor became sites for camps or ranges as the land would have been cheap to buy. Longmoor was in heath and woodland and the trees and scrub seemed to be the ideal place for numerous mosquitoes, which had already begun their dastardly attacks, and would leave us with numerous raw patches where we scratched ourselves- over and above the notoriously itchy 1937 style battledress that we wore in our CCF!

We went inside and inspected our beds and accommodation. After a while, an ACF corporal approached me and left an indelible memory with me, indeed his is the only name of that group I can recall. He said (and I will not type everything in his vernacular) "I am Corporal Oliphant". He sat down on the bed next to me, and drew out of his battledress trouser pocket a very large penknife and revealed an alarmingly long and narrow blade, sharpened on both edges, and proceeded to inform me that "I kill sows with this, I shoves it into her temple here" a motion that he replicated with his finger on my temple. "I turns it, and she's a gonner". Well, to me this was a bit of a conversation stopper [Ed – well, it would be wouldn't it?!] and I mumbled something like "Oh, that's really handy" whilst thinking "What have we got ourselves into here?"

And bearing in mind that SGS, although a grammar school was not a namby-pamby place, this was a different breed of creature for sure and it was turning out to be a very long, itchy and sleepless night! We tried to get some sleep, but the ACF boys were like a large dysfunctional and fractious family and they didn't settle. The lights went

on and off, until finally their sergeant announced in a commanding yokel voice “The next one to make a sound, I’m going to Blanco his bollocks”. Immediately a younger yokel voice rang out, saying “You bleedin’ well don’t really mean it!” On went the lights, out came a can of Blanco, a large scrubbing brush was procured, off came the pyjama bottoms and the Blanco was vigorously applied to the accompaniment of high-pitched yelling and pleading for a cessation of the treatment that only increased the vigour of the brush strokes to the sensitive parts of the cadet’s anatomy.

Well, it was a long night, and we finally got some sleep, although there was a general feeling that we might have to defend ourselves from our new “friends”, some of whom it seemed, were trained killers. And all our observations seemed to give some veracity to the claim that “Incest was the favourite sport of the English labouring classes” or something similar, because, based on our short acquaintance, they appeared to be rather too keen on each other!! But they do organise things differently in the countryside, and xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx (censored – Ed) - just a few miles away from the Portsmouth City limit (to use an Americanism) was many miles away in behavioural terms!

The next day, we were off to the firing range, and despite being tired and itchy, we were on for the first challenge, the “Falling Plate Contest”. Down on the ranges and above the butts were placed, many hundreds of yards away, a row of steel plates that looked no bigger than a four penny stamp. We were to take on the ACF boys and as most of us were “marksmen” after the Empire Test, we thought we were in with a chance. However, we were going to use the Self Loading Rifle - the SLR, which was a semi-automatic rifle version of the Belgian made “FN” which fired a 7.62mm round (.300”) unlike our bolt action .22 rifles used at school in our range. In twos we took on the ACF and quickly got nowhere. Finally, my turn arrived, and I lay down, sighted up the target and fired. There was a clang, I had hit the plate and heard Sergeant Grist of the Royal Hampshire say “Desperation shot, Jimmy Pillock”. He had christened me this name after appraising my marching skills - or rather, the lack of them - so I sighted up again and there was a bang, a blinding pain in my temple - the one Oliphant had poked the night before - and I was seeing stars! Essentially, I had been knocked cold by the spent cartridge that had ejected at high speed from my neighbour’s rifle, and for me the war, or at least the contest was over! We were only wearing berets, so that ejecting cartridge, flying out at some crazy velocity had hit me in the temple and that was that. We consoled ourselves with the notion that the sights on the SLR were crude in comparison with the Lee Enfield, and the ACF must have been lucky as you couldn’t hit anything smaller than a big bank of sand, with this Belgian invented monstrosity!

We moved on to the next stage of the experience where we were to fire the 9mm Sterling machine gun - the weapon that had superseded the dodgy and crude Sten gun in the army. This was surely going to be fun, tossing around all that lead! We were instructed to stand and shoot 3 rounds at the target, advance X paces and shoot 3 more at the target, then repeat the advance and go on to the automatic setting and unload all the remaining 28 odd bullets into the target in a real “hosing down” operation. We were warned that the Sterling would elevate itself on automatic, so we should aim low and allow the gun to arc upward as it fired. Aim short of the target and let the gun move upwards, under control, and rake the target in the vertical plane. We followed the instructions, and blow me down if it wasn’t like wrestling with a python or

something alive and nasty that wanted to bite your bum or something when you went automatic! There were bullets peppering the ground and dust was raised, some even managed to get all 28 bullets into the ground! When we had finished we could inspect the cardboard man-shaped target and very few had hit it more than 3 times - probably from the single aimed shots. But that would have stopped him, so all was well with the sergeants! We felt we could use a little extra practise, but we were off to the next stage, which was rifle grenade drill.

This meant we were back to our least favourite weapon of choice, the SLR. Chuck a blank into the chamber, stick the rifle grenade on the barrel, in this case an inert grenade, fire the rifle canted from the hip, and toss the grenade at the foot of the target - a lesson in geometry really as I suppose David Beckham would tell you! Well it was the falling plate experience all over again, but this time nobody was getting close until one of the bumpkins fired the shot that demonstrated the "perfect trajectory". Well he was as they say in football lingo "Over the moon" and started jumping around - still holding the SLR and managed to pretty well push the rifle barrel up the nostril of Sergeant Lawson's (I think that was his name) nose. This did not endear the cavorting celebrator to the Sergeant who gave him an epic tongue-lashing about not going bonkers whilst holding a rifle and never to insert anything into the anatomy of anyone- least of all a Warrant Officer, unless specifically ordered to do so by said Warrant Officer etc. This of course, restored our spirits somewhat as we felt that the ACF were just displaying "beginners' luck" and only had about 8 brain cells to rub between themselves (and this was amply demonstrated the at the Parachute Regiment "trainasium" in Aldershot the very next day!).

At this point in my narrative, it is worth mentioning that the Sergeants from the Royal Hampshires tended to start or finish all their instruction with the following phrase or variants thereof. "There's a hairy-arsed Russian, armed to the teeth, coming at you with his gun blazing.....What are you going to do?" In my case Sergeant Grist would always add his name of endearment "Jimmy Pillock" to any question aimed at me. We were all rather transfixed by this vision of these "hairy-arsed Russians" that seemed to be everywhere in their world but Sergeant Grist would invariably deviate from the Russians to his main target of hatred, which was Harold Wilson's Labour Government - obviously the **real** enemy! In his lectures there was the cancellation of the TSR2 aircraft, the abandonment of East of Suez, and for good measure he would normally castigate the Yanks for making a real mess in Vietnam. They should "Get off their fat arses, get out of their ice cream vans, stop swigging Coca Cola and listening to pop music and do some real soldiering like we had to in Malaya.....and it's lucky they have got the Aussies there to stop them getting their arses well and truly kicked by the Vietcong". I like to think some of his sensibilities rubbed off on me and helped me look at complex issues in perspective!!!

The Longmoor Military Railway was constructed in 1903 by the Royal Engineers, and had expanded to about 70 miles of track including sidings, so it was a proper railway. It ran from Liss where it connected to BR on the Portsmouth line up to Longmoor where it formed circular loops, then onward to Bordon where it joined the BR Bentley to Bordon branch line. "The Great St Trinians Train Robbery" (1966) was filmed there as was the sketch "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Golfer" from Marty Feldman's "It's Marty" comedy of 1969. The railway was close to closure when we went there - it shut later that year, but it was becoming a railway preservation Mecca

as the artist David Shepherd (who had big plans for the place) had brought his locos there, as had other groups. And in 1968 when I was in 2L, I had accompanied Barnes (2S) and Dunkeley (3K) for a day to work (mostly idle about as it happened) on the big Pacific loco "Clan Line" at Longmoor, so I knew what a treasure trove of interesting old junk the place really was!

We were shown the signalling centre where a wonderful old "O" gauge model railway was controlled by proper signalling equipment. The idea behind this was to train Royal Engineers all about signalling a railway "without busting up the real thing". We visited the sheds where the army kept its diesel shunters plus the two steam engines it wished to preserve - number 600 "Gordon" now on the Severn Valley Railway caught the eye of Mr Windhaber who was with us at that point. I think he would have taken Gordon home with him, but he was probably concerned about what his wife might say! There were plinths with funny old railway engines like "Gazelle" and other relics across the camp, plus other items collected by the Royal Engineers over the years. Apparently, they had one of the notorious "hook apparatus" wagons the Germans had perfected for their "scorched earth" retreat policy - the last train out dragged this along and it ploughed up the line as it passed over it - ideal for Network Rail. Anyway, we were in this wonderful "Boys' Paradise" of smelly and dank buildings with their treasure trove but we could not stay. This was because we were off for some "Introductory Explosives Training" [Ed - having read to this point "heaven forbid!"] and a trip to Aldershot, to visit the trainasium all of which I will cover in gory detail, in my next instalment in this catalogue of "Health & Safety Horrors". These horrors were as practised back in The Swinging Sixties, which, as you are reading this, you will probably recall was an era of "Tune in, Turn On and Drop Out" except for us grammar school boys who were swotting away (with a few notable exceptions who shall remain nameless!). Those of us in the CCF army section were also busy polishing "ammunition boots" until they shone, the brass on our canvas webbing, and using Blanco on that webbing and not on the nether regions of fellow cadets!

From memory, other cadets on this weekend would include Little, White, Moody, Thompson, Percy who were in my year and older and more senior boys in the CCF such as Saunders, Weston, John and possibly Casey and Beer who definitely did Penhale the following month. I don't think all the army section attended (and they were lucky- they wouldn't be boggling their eyes typing this out now) but I have been "Around the Block" a few times these last 40 odd years, so whereas the experiences are so memorable, I cannot recall all the participants. I have a feeling that as we were "close to home" the masters came and went during the day - they certainly did not have to endure the experience in the billet!

PART 2 SUNDAY

We arose smartly early on the Sunday morning, and marched briskly down to the Longmoor base canteen where we lined up ready to "fall out". Before this order could be given various windows had been opened and a fusillade of insults was aimed our way by regular army soldiers. "Keep the bloody noise down" and "Go and play soldiers somewhere else etc" and some even more pithy remarks were yelled!

Well, we got into the canteen, and I have to say that in my estimation (unlike back at SGS) the food was very good, plentiful- you helped yourself, and far exceeded the

quantity and quality we would find at Penhale Camp near Newquay the next month. I suppose as Longmoor was a proper regular army camp, the food was good. Now, it's possible that the exact chronology of the weekend is slightly awry in my memory after 40 years, but I am pretty sure that the explosives training and the trainasium were both on the Sunday. One thing is for sure, the detail of these two experiences is clear in my mind- and will always remain thus!

The explosives training began with some elementary introduction discussion about the key qualities of plastic explosive in a lecture room. We all sat down and Sgt Lawson (?) gave us his advice on this material. "Plastic explosive is so called because it can be moulded into or around the point you wish to destroy. It is characterised by a strong smell of marzipan". He had a big ball of the stuff which he then passed to the nearest cadet and requested that the ball be passed around and each cadet should get a good sniff of the unique smell. Well, we all sniffed that ball as ordered and once the explosive was back in his grasp he continued, "plastic explosive is toxic and should be treated with care - never sniff it or you'll get a dirty great headache". After a while one of the Army Cadet Force boys piped up and asked if he could go out and get some air as his head was about to explode. Sgt Lawson remarked "I hope you haven't been sniffing that plastic explosive, it's nasty stuff- it's toxic". My head started to throb shortly afterwards!

Well, we were all led outside and after a short walk we were on the edge of a sand pit or quarry. We all sat down and Sgt Lawson produced a fuse that he stuffed into the explosive which he announced was a 30 second fuse, which he lit and rammed into the ball of explosive that he then gave to White (3S) to hold. White who was always a chatty lad went very quiet and also whiter than usual. After what seemed like an age, Sgt Lawson said to White. "I don't know what you're doing holding that explosive lad, but it's going to explode in about 7 seconds. Chuck it into the pit". White needed no more prompting, lobbing the ball of explosives into the pit from which an immediate deafening bang and a cloud of bits roared out in a most impressive explosion!

So that was our explosives training completed, and we were ushered towards a Bedford 3 ¼ ton truck as we were apparently headed to Aldershot! The driver was a rather round faced short fellow with an impenetrable accent which I would now suggest indicated that he was a Geordie. All I know is that this chap from the Royal Corps of Transport seemed to hit it off with the scary Oliphant who jumped into the cab with him whilst the rest of us piled in at the back. We careered off down the road - Bordon, Farnham whilst Oliphant could be heard yelling "Drive, drive, faster, faster, give her more welly, don't slow down you bastard" and it didn't seem to be very long before we were in Aldershot and our destination - the mythic Parachute Regiment Trainasium. This was where the men were sorted out from the boys, and those with an instinct for self preservation identified whilst those without a head for heights removed from the training. It was most intimidating- this scaffolding tower covered with scaling netting, some parallel scaffolding bars, some extended cable runs and then an aerial railway of sorts - cabling with a bar and pulley system that let you glide back down through the woods slowly to terra firma, all very simple and simply horrible!

Now, when I had been a few years younger I could be found clinging to the slenderest branches of the tallest trees, swaying in the breeze thinking how great it was to be up so high. Something had happened since I had turned 11 and whatever it was, it had imbued me with a knowledge that trees and heights were for squirrels and birds. We were all issued with the famous pot-shaped para steel helmet (the one that was an almost direct copy of the original German item) and I began to scale that tower, and as I got closer to the top, I realised that this just wasn't what a sensible grammar school boy should be attempting, so I climbed back down, which from memory is what we all did in the SGS contingent - anyone who didn't please feel free to correct me! The ACF boys, however, seemed to view the hazards of the course with complete contempt and whizzed around without a care in the world! Indeed, some were saying "That's fantastic, can we go around again?" Sadly, for these intrepid daredevils, time was running out and we had to go (what a shame!). Mind you back in the 1980s when there was a TV series on the Paras, they went to the trainasium, and a number of seasoned recruits keen to make it failed to do the trainasium, and I can't say I blame them. The Parachute regiment is now based in Colchester, and I imagine the Aldershot trainasium is no more. I suppose I could ask my neighbour who is a former para if it's still there. He's a mine of information. He told me that all the German equipment in their museum is.....oh I better shut up on that.

So that was our weekend in Longmoor. Within 6 weeks we would be off to Penhale. Now, that was not a regular army camp. I can remember someone striding up to the menu board there, rubbing out the name PENHALE at the top, and chalking in BIAFRA instead. Yeah, Camp Biafra where the phrase "This muck's terrible and there ain't enough of it" was perhaps the most appropriate description of the food.

To get to Penhale, we had to meet early at Portsmouth & Southsea Station to catch a train to Salisbury where we would get on to a special army train to Newquay. On arrival at P & S Mr Flack announced that due to some problem with the railway - I think it was a lightning strike - there was no way we could get to Salisbury, but we could get to Woking and be in time to get the military train. So we got onto this train which was absolutely infested with khaki clad "yoofs" - Londoners it seemed - and it was basically a seething mass of misbehaviour, a veritable borstal on wheels. I can remember one cadet thought it would be a real laugh to open a door at speed- a door facing the "up" line no less, and clambered out. Whilst he was outside, his "mates" slammed the door and kept him on the outside for many a mile. This was down in Devon where there were plenty of curves, and he clung on like grim death screaming until his friends relented and let him back inside. Then as we passed through Plymouth someone lobbed a drinks can (back in 1969 they were heavy steel) out of the window just as we passed on a bridge over a road. The can sailed down and struck an old man on a bike who, seeing me - I was leaning out of a window, - hurled imprecations and waved his fist- and I was an innocent party. I have to say that I was more than a little emotionally exhausted by the time we got to Penhale - it had been a long and eventful day and I felt utterly drained and very low.

Mind you the two weeks at Penhale were good fun. A trip in a helicopter- and what a trip - it was piloted by the RAF version of those Royal Hampshire sergeants! Neil Armstrong took his "giant leap for mankind", Teddy Kennedy did what the Kennedy clan was really good at and we did a forced march to Brighton - no, not that Brighton. Visited RNAS Culdrose - seeing St Piran's oratory en route (at about 5am, so for me,

it was as interesting as a public convenience but Mr Sonnet was most impressed (“Get a life” Ron!!). I believe it’s now back buried in the sand dunes as it was for all those centuries - beaten by the Great British Vandal. Finally, we managed to “put one over” on the army - “the famous broken window incident”. We broke a window as we cleaned up on the last day. We took out the broken glass and then polished up all the windows so well and that the inspector failed to spot that one window that had no glass in it, and he commended us on the tidiness and cleanliness all round!

So that was it, perhaps someone would like to write up the two weeks. I can remember the glow worms at night - a magical place- it’s a shame the food was so awful, and the last place I can remember where you had a public phone with buttons A and B! I reckon I slept for most of the train journey back- which was good- a hot day and itchy battledress, sleep was a blessed relief!

Nick Ratnieks
December 2008