

Once a Sapper

For many of us, I am sure that there will always have been a “love / hate relationship” with Service life – in my own case, almost a life-long relationship. Fortunately (again for most of us) the “hate” part of the relationship fades from memory much more quickly than the “love” part, and so the bad times, the hard times, the uncomfortable or positively dangerous times eventually have a less prominent place in our recollections and affections than the good times, the happy times, and the times of friendship and comradeship which we can all reflect upon as a major part of our Service life.

As I have mentioned, my Service connections are almost life-long. It was only a few years after the WW1 service of my father and all the other male members of my family had come to an end, and the whole country had fought its way through the depression and industrial turmoil of the 1920's and early 30's, that I joined the Cadet Corps` (or Officers Training Corps as it was then called) of the Cambridge school which I was attending. It was an enthusiastic group, offered by several ex-WW1 masters, and most of us joined as soon as we were old enough to do so. Well, the choice was really a simple one – either join the OTC (with the privilege of being able to go to school I uniform on Wednesdays with the excitement of the afternoon parades on the school playing fields, and the once-a-term days off to take part in “Field Days” out in the country where we tried to put into practice all that we had been taught about field-craft tactics and concealment, to take part in TEWTS, and to consume as many buns and cups of tea as the local WVS (they has not yet become “Royal”, so were not yet “WRVS”) could supply to us at the muddy end of the day!, or stay and help the school caretaker with his chores, collecting litter, emptying dustbins, etc. Those amongst us who might have has any lurking pacifist or “conscientious” feelings quickly put them aside and became enthusiastic cadets at the earliest opportunity, and rapidly acquired the knack of winding our putties in even spirals round our legs, blancking our webbing belts diligently, and polishing every bit of brass that we could find!

WW2 broke out while I was still at school, and the older boys were recruited to spend the summer holidays of 1939 digging trenches on the school playing fields to provide shelters for everyone in the event of air-raids during school hours. Then, early in 1940, the Home Guard (or Local Defence Volunteers as they were first called) was formed following on of Winston Churchill's rousing speeches calling the nation to arms. This new volunteer defence force was very happy to enrol young, partly-trained cadets such as we were, as well as WW1 veterans and others, so I was a first-day enlistment when the local recruiting office opened in May. Then followed a period of about two years when daytime school, final exams and then work had to be combined with evening, night-time and weekend parades and patrolling of the roads and fields around home, weekend exercises and dawn stand-tos when German air-raids occurred or invasion by German parachutists was deemed to be imminent. It was an exhausting time, but very exciting for any teenager, and there are plenty of stories (some funny, some rather sadder) that may be told one of these days about what we did (or did not do) while “guarding the homeland”.

Then came the “real stuff”! In mid-1942, my intended career as an architect was put on hold, and I joined up, with an initial posting to Maryhill Barracks in the Milngavoe area of Glasgow (it was a long time before we Sassenachs understood what he local people were talking about when they said that they were “gorn tay Mull-guy”. We never did learn why it was pronounced that way). At tat time, all new intakes went first into the “Primary Training Corps” – a wartime invention set up to accept and assess the huge intakes of raw man-(and woman) power ten coming into the Army. After some basic training (which seemed to consist mainly of square-bashing), PT, and long ankle-punishing running sessions over the cobbled streets around Mary Hill), combined with basic intelligence and agility tests, we were allowed to what were deemed to be appropriate corps or regiments. Maryhill Barracks in those early months of winter 1942, seemed to be the most God-forsaken place that I ever wished to see (although I must say that, since then, I have seen one or two places which would have given it a good run for its money!); the barracks were very old – scheduled for demolition just before the war broke out, we were told – had absolutely no modern conveniences of any sort (even hot water did not appear to have been invented in Glasgow by 1942!) and was bitterly cold. With pay at 21/- (£1.05) per week (but we were issued wit 12/- (60p), the remainder being “saved” for us as “post War credits”), life was not exactly a bowl of roses for the six weeks that we were in Glasgow. Most of us were youngsters, fresh from the comforts of home and we really suffered. I think I prayed for a posting as far south as possible – never mind what sort of unit I was going to just let me go somewhere south and WARM. So I could not have been more pleased when my first posting came through – to the Royal Engineers Transportation Training Centre at Longmoor in Hampshire. I felt that my prayers had been answered, and I boarded the overnight train to Paddington with an

immense sense of relief. Arriving in London before dawn the next morning, I joined the rush hour crowd for the short journey across London to Waterloo, and then the chocolate and cream carriages of the Southern Railway connecting Liphook to Longmore and on to Bordon – a railway which I was to use many times in the weeks that followed.

And so it was that in December 1942, I became a Sapper, joined the Corps of Royal Engineers at Longmoor; my induction was by a course in Field Engineering – four weeks of digging trenches (and filling them again), erecting barbed wire entanglements (and dismantling them again. Gloves? Good Heavens No! They were only for softies in other corps and regiments, certainly not for Royal Engineers), practicing how to carry large baulks of timber on our shoulders while marching on the soft, sandy terrain of Longmoor Camp (being one of the tallest members of the squad, I was sure that I always carried far more than my fair share of the weight, as the shoulders of the shortest chaps barely touched the timber), and learning how to tie a variety of strange knots and lashings (we were assured that, in an emergency, it might be necessary to do any of these at night, in the dark, as we could only practise doing them in the daylight, we had to do them behind our backs. Anyone who has tried to perform this feat will appreciate how difficult we found it to complete something like a double sheet bend in this way – many of us finished with a tangle that looked far more like a cat's cradle than a proper knot. At times, we found it difficult even to disentangle our fingers. Even as raw recruits, we did wonder, though, whether it was a misprint in the RE Fieldworks handbook, when our particular know was described as being useful for “lowering a man up a wall”!). Another skill to be learned was how to erect and dismantle scaffolding; I will never forget the day when the thirty feet high tower on which we were working collapsed – I think we must have omitted certain essential triangulating ties and braces, when the noise stopped and the dust settled, we were amazed to find that no-one had been killed – numerous sappers who had been working on the tower were standing, with ashen grey faces, exactly where they had fallen, wreckage strewn around them – and no-one has so much as a scratch!

After four weeks of such excitement, we were deemed to have qualified as “Field Engineers Class 3”, and were granted our first leave – ten days back at home in the comfort of our families. To everyone's (including my own) astonishment, I discovered that ten weeks of square bashing, PT, long runs, and heavy Field Works had caused me to gain two and a half stones in weight (alright, 16.5 kgs to you metric buffs!). Who said that hard work never hurt anyone? Sad to say, I have never been able to lose that extra weight again!

Returning to Longmore after Christmas 1942, I was re-mustered as a “Surveyor (Engineering)” – “Railway Surveyor” in all but name – and after a brief, intensive training course (a peacetime six month course ruthlessly compressed into a nearly impossible six weeks to meet the demands of wartime) found myself with 609 Railway Construction Co. busy laying or extending railway networks in Wiltshire, Dorset and Cornwall. It was a period of frantic activity during which I acquired muscles totally unnecessary for a surveying career, for when there was no surveying work to be done (which seemed to be quite often!) we surveyors joined the rest of the company and devoted our time and energy to track, manhandling the heavy wooden sleepers and rails (at 90lbs per foot those rails were not light weight things!), and when the rails had been bolted together, slewing the lengths of completed track into position until an exact alignment had been achieved, using heavy crowbars as levers. It was a hard, hot, filthy, physical, day-long job – and, returning to camp at the end of each day's work, it was noticeable that I was, once again in an area where hot water had not yet been invented! In Hampshire! In 1942!

Within about a year, 609 Coy. was put into readiness to join the forthcoming invasion of Italy; they were a few Surveyors over strength, and so two of us were left behind, and a few weeks later I was given a move into the Works Services Section of the Corps, with a posting to Salisbury Plain District, after a short training period of SME Ripon, later, another move took me to West Sussex, where the CRE was working flat out on preparing facilities ready for the build-up of troops in Southern England prior to D-Day, as well as the ever-lasting need to keep abreast of the repairs to sea-defences, and work required on anti-invasion measures along the beaches of the South Coast.

It was towards the end of 1944 that RE Postings decided that I had been around the UK long enough, and calculated that a trip to the Far East ought to be good for my health and my suntan. A train journey took me up to the Depot Battalion RE in Halifax, where we were soon inoculated and injected until we felt like pin-cushions. During this time, we were housed in a previously condemned school building, I was sure that Halifax was probably marginally worse than Glasgow had been two years earlier! A similar experience must have been the reason for someone coining the saying “From Hull, Hell and Halifax, good Lord preserve us!” A short embarkation leave, and then we were kitted

out with tropical gear, and made our way overnight to Gourock, on the Clyde, where we joined the Union Castle Line vessel “Warwick Castle”, which had been fitted out as a troopship. Apart from “The Far East” we still had no idea of exactly where we were going, though rumours abounded, but after six weeks of steady increasing temperatures (and the “enjoyment” of three-tier “standees” as sleeping accommodation on the hot and humid troop decks) we finally arrived in Bombay as part of a large convoy – so large that our ship had to stand off in the harbour for three days before we could get alongside to disembark. For anyone who has never been to Bombay, it is difficult for me to convey the feelings that I, and the others on the bus which took us to the camp at Kalyan, a few miles outside of “street-sleepers” living in cardboard boxes, the crippled beggars (deliberately crippled in many cases to make their begging more appealing), and the awful odours that made us retch continuously, were something I will never, ever forget. To a great extent, one gets used to these things in time, but that initial impact was simply horrendous, and will stay in my memory forever.

The next two and a half years could provide a bookful of memories on their own, and saw me travelling from Bombay up to the Indian Army’s Military Engineer Service Depot at Jullundur in the Punjab (now Pakistan, close to the border with Afghanistan), then back to Calcutta (a seven-day journey by train then with only slatted wooden seats to sit on by day and to sleep on by night, and “air-conditioning” provided by an occasional block of ice thrown in through the carriage door, once or twice a day, at one of the few wayside stations where the train passed). After Calcutta it was back up north again, across the Brahmaputra river into Assam and finally into Burma. The railhead was at Dimapur, and after that, it was a case of hitch-hiking on any Army vehicle which happened to be going my way down the Manipur Road, through Imphal and Kohima, as far as Kalewa, which is on the Chindwin river, and then on an old riverboat with a group of Ghurkas until we reached Monywa (close to Mandalay). The unit that I was to join was CRE 122 (Indian) Works RIE; the “front” was very fluid at that time, as the Japs were being pushed back into Burma, so the unit had been continually on the move, and when I eventually caught up with it, it was located in Meiktila, in the centre of North Burma. My journey from Bombay to reach the CRE had taken exactly six months! It is unusual, in RE Works Services to move as a unit, moves are normally on the basis of individual postings, from one unit to another, and that was the case with my move, six-months travelling about a strange land by myself, sometimes with a railway warrant in my pocket, but mostly hitch-hiking as best I could by road or river, with the occasional vague guidance from RE Movement Control on the lines of “Well the last time we heard of them, they had gone thataway”. (Well you know what they say about Movement Control – all control in the UK, all movement anywhere else!”)

Demobbed on my return to the UK in mid 1947, I found to my surprise that my pre-Service employment was not available for me to take up again. In any case I had decided that I much preferred Surveying to Architecture, and so for the next five years I concentrated on obtaining my qualifications in that profession, (plus getting married and starting to raise a family). However, in 1952, the Royal Engineers needed additional qualified surveyors, so (being a bit of a glutton for punishment!) I rejoined the Corps, where, as an “old soldier”, I was welcomed with open arms.

Within four months, I had my next overseas posting – Malaya. In February 1953 I joined the Bibby Line ss “Dilwara” at Southampton, bound for Singapore, she was the sister ship of the “Dunera”, two of the troopships on the regular UK/Far East run at that time. Although, ten years earlier it had taken me six weeks to reach Bombay, on this journey we reached Singapore, several thousand miles further away, in just four weeks. I plainly remember the strong, welcoming smell of the land, and its vegetation, on the evening that the “Dilwara” turned into the Malacca Straights on the last leg into Singapore, for it was so different from the previous weeks of fresh, salty, marine smells that we had had up to that point. The next day, I paid my respects to the Chief Engineer’s Branch in Orchard Road before catching the night train up to Kuala Lumpur (or ‘KL’ as it is always known), the capital city of Malaya, with its amazing railway station, more like a temple or castle than a railway station, with its domes and colonnaded structure. In KL, I joined the staff of the Chief Engineer, Malaya, working for the next three years on projects throughout the country. Although Malaya was, by then, slowly being got under control again after five years of terrorist problems (the Emergency lasted, officially, from 1948 to 1960), there were still many restrictions in force, and it was necessary to ‘watch one’s step’ wherever one went, especially outside the reasonably secure areas of the main towns and barracks. The main line trains from Singapore to KL, and from KL up to Butterworth were still being run under armed guard, and ‘incidents’ frequently occurred. My wife and son were able to join me later on, and in 1955, our second son arrived, born at BMH Kinara, just outside KL. So, all things considered, it must have been a successful tour! Fraser’s Hill, Cameron Highlands, Penang – so many places, so many memories – enough for another book some day, perhaps, which will have to include some account of our efforts to match the skill and cunning of the local contractors

whom we employed; the use of an occasional word of Malay or Cantonese was an excellent tactic, for they never knew, then, how much one understood (usually very little) of what they had been quietly discussing between themselves!

After Malaya (and truly terrible flight home in an ancient RAF Hermes which took almost a week to do the journey – daytime flying only, with night stops (mostly from about 11.00 pm to 4.00 am, which has to include being taken in a bus miles out into the country to a hostel) at Calcutta, Karachi, Bahrain, Nicosia, and Rome, my next move (almost as good as good as overseas again) was to Scotland, to join CRE Highlands for another three years (and another son! We have quite a League of Nations in our family – one Devonian, one Malay and one Scot), before we were off to the Far East again, this time to Hong Kong (it was almost! Nepal, but at the last moment, another RE Surveyor requested an unaccompanied posting, so he went to Nepal and I went to HK. I do believe that he regretted it afterwards!

Hong Kong was, of course, an experience (and perhaps another book some day?) on its own. For various reasons, our tour of duty was extended from the then normal three years to a bit over three and a half and in the late 1950's and early 60's, HK was a wonderful, exhilarating place in many ways – I remember thinking, in my early days there, as I joined the morning stampede from the mainland (Kowloon, where we lived in a married quarter) to Hong Kong Island (where my place of work – part of the Chief Engineer HK's HQ – was located), "I shall never keep up with this – everyone runs everywhere!" Of course, one soon adjusts to the different pace of life, and, being taller and hence longer-legged than the majority of the Chinese, it was often possible to achieve quite a respectable position in the morning and evening race, across and from the Star Ferry – the only means, then, of crossing HK Harbour. Since our time there, a cross-harbour tunnel has been constructed and frequent electrically operated train services move thousands of people smoothly to and from, twenty-four hours a day. Surely the Ferry was more fun though? Although we all knew that the British lease of the mainland (Kowloon and the New Territories) had, at that time, less than forty years to run until its 1997 expiry, we knew that Hong Kong Island had been ceded to Britain "in perpetuity", and I think that we were all confident that the agreement would be honoured, and that, somehow, a new lease or an extension of the existing one – would be negotiated for the "British" area of the mainland. I do not believe that anyone who served in HK in our time there ever envisaged that it would be relinquished without a murmur and handed back to China. There must have been an enormous sense of disappointment and frustration among the remaining "ex-pats" who were still there in the late 1990's and profound feelings that they had been badly "let down" and abandoned by the British Government – and particularly so amongst the "British Chinese" in the colony, many of whom were intensely loyal and regarded themselves as more British than Chinese. Personally I am very sceptical about the real value of the guarantees given at the time of the handover that, for the next fifty years the independence of the local people and the preservation of their legal and political systems would be honoured. Those who live the longest will no doubt see the most!

I have mentioned some of the good things about life in HK while we were there (though there is not space here to touch upon the excitement of climbing Lion Rock, exploring The New Territories, visiting the "Forbidden City" and the Plover Cove (now a huge fresh water reservoir), Lo Wu and Robins Nest with their views across the frontier into China itself, and so many other places where work or pleasure took us, but there were, of course many less enjoyable aspects of life in the Colony. Shortage of water was a major problem (the main reason for the construction of the reservoir mentioned above) – one hour's supply on alternate days was all that was available in the dry season – humidity reached almost 100% for part of the year, which meant that everyone's clothes and body were permanently wet (this occurred of course, when the water supply was most restricted, so washing, showering and laundering of clothes was particularly difficult), most UK based people were extremely susceptible to local diseases when they first arrived and often took several months to acquire immunity – in our own case, there was one period when our three-year old son was the only member of the family who was not ill, and shortly after that his younger brother was desperately ill in the BMH for some weeks with hepatitis B.

From a work point of view, HK was a civil engineer's paradise. Even while we were there, a huge amount of development was taking place, but, in the 1970's and 80's the pace of this quickened greatly, with engineering and building works being carried out on sites which would have been considered impossible in most other places. Skyscraper and multi-lane highways abound, and as I have already mentioned the cross-harbour railway has transformed life. Although much of HK is rocky, the subsoil is very variable, so any building of any size is automatically erected on piled foundations, and the Colony resounded with the penetrating thump of pile-drivers by

day and night. Because of the uncertain and unstable nature of some of the ground, unusual civil engineering techniques were often called for, and I remember one site on the Island where, when it was found impossible to drive piles sufficiently deep to obtain the requisite loaded capacity, the engineers decided to stabilise the ground by pumping in a liquid cement grout under high pressure. The pumps had been forcing into the grout for only a short while, when (to the amusement of the onlookers – and no doubt, rival engineers!) all the piles which had already been driven into the ground started popping out again. That building was eventually erected, but is literally floating on a giant hollow concrete caisson.

Life in HK was never dull, but came to an end for us in 1962 when we returned to the UK for my final posting, to CRE Shoeburyness – a very different environment from HK! Here our area covered mainly the Proof and Experimental Establishment with its firing ranges across Foulness, Havengore and New England Islands (all typical Essex marshlands), and the Environmental Testing Centre, where the performance of all types of armaments old and new, was assessed and checked under all kinds of climatic conditions. A further posting to Ghana was a distant possibility after Shoeburyness (in fact, we had our bags and boxes all packed and ready to go) until there was an eleventh-hour decision to “Ghananise” the appointment that I had been due to take up. So we unpacked everything again, and saw out the remainder of my regular service in Shoeburyness until I joined the ranks of “The Old and Bold” in 1966.

However, “Once a Sapper, Always a Sapper” as our Corps saying goes, and so I have maintained a reasonably active roll in the RE Association since retirement and lately it has been a very pleasant extra experience to have joined the NMBVA and enjoy the friendship of a different and widely experienced group – and share some more memories and a few yarns (and the occasional pint) on the third Wednesday each month.

In recent years I have been fortunate enough to be able to re-visit Malaya and Burma. In Malaya, the development of Singapore, KL and Penang has made them almost unrecognisable from what they were in the 1950’s, but Burma (with the possible exception of Rangoon) is completely unchanged since the 1940’s – in fact, I would almost swear that they still have the same potholes in the roads that they had when I was there before!

As I said at the beginning, it has been almost a life-long association with the Army, and looking back, I don’t think that I would really have wished it any other way. It has taken me to some strange, out-of-the-way places (quite off any tourist trail!), and I have met some unusual people, shared some strange experiences – and had quiet a bit of fun along the way.

Reading through these notes before typing them, I am conscious that they may read as if it was all a bit of fun. I do assure you that it was not, as many others who have been through something similar will readily confirm I know. There were some bad bits – very bad bits sometimes – but as I said at the beginning of these notes, thank goodness, they have faded from memory much more quickly than the good bits.

JAL