

## A Soldier of the Queen part 2. Michael Cockett

Nine months after I had been stranded on the beach at Limassol, Cyprus, I was back on board the troopship and on my way home. The intervening nine months do not add up to a coherent story rather to a patchwork of remembered events and activities.

After some deliberations I was first parked in the education centre on the Episkopi army base. I received a friendly welcome and I was allocated sleeping accommodation in a bell tent. The friendly welcome included a long evening in the sergeant's mess and after some time I set off to find my tent. It was pitch dark and the tent was one of what seemed like hundreds set in serried rows, regulation distances apart. I remember the sensation of having no idea which one was mine but I also remember that, in the morning, the one I woke up in did contain my belongings.

After a few days I was informed that I was to be posted to Dhekelia, another army camp further west, actually sixty kilometres further west and I was to get there by bus. This was just over a week since the ceasefire and I had to assume that it would hold as I travelled along the coast. The bus had wire netting instead of windows and the other passengers were all women who greeted friends and acquaintances and chattered but took absolutely no notice of me as though a lone soldier travelling on their bus was nothing remarkable. They mounted and alighted with large bags and in one case some chickens, so I assume it was market day.

Eventually I was dropped off in what the driver said was Dhekelia. Once again, I was completely alone this time on a dusty street lined by what I assumed were army buildings. I had no idea where to go or what to do. At this point a mini-moke roared round the corner and screeched to a halt some way past me then backed up. It was driven by a short, rounded figure with a warrant officer's star. "I saw your RAEC flashes" he said. "We were expecting you. Bit of luck I passed when I did. Jump in." It turned out he was the RAEC Warrant Officer based at the Dhekelia Education Centre. He must have had another name but everyone just called him Bunny. We arrived at what turned out to be the local sergeant's mess and accommodation. It consisted of two long huts. I was allocated a room in one of them and the other was the dining room and bar.

The next day I was introduced to the Education Centre. Here there are serious gaps in my memory. For example, I know there were several other people of my rank there but I cannot remember any of them, either names or faces. I must have been allocated teaching duties but I have no recollection of teaching any daytime classes. I did teach an evening class mainly for NCOs who wanted to gain their first-class certificates so that they could apply for commissions. I was teaching maths. I understood the maths, but they didn't. I had no idea why and no idea how to help them to understand. They got frustrated and angry with me for my failings as a teacher which I think was reasonable.

After some weeks some of the original crew had reached the end of their National Service and set off for home. This included one person who had been acting as clerk to the education centre. For some reason or other I was allocated his role. So here again is one of the mysteries of life. The Education Centre was staffed by a Captain, a Second Lieutenant, a Warrant Officer (Bunny), a clerk (now me) a secretary who was female and Armenian, several Sergeants and a "Chai Wallah". I think he was actually Turkish Cypriot. He provided tea made with condensed milk at regular intervals and cleaned and tidied. The mystery is, apart from the Chai Wallah, what did we all do? I have no recollection of the Captain or Second Lieutenant doing anything, not even issuing instructions. There was some activity in the main office and we published a news letter including information about what was on at the cinema but most of the time we just filled in time and this went on for nine months.

The working day in the summer started at 7-00am and finished at 12-30pm. It was then back to the mess for lunch and either a siesta or take the short walk to the NCO's club house on the beach where you could swim, get drinks and sunbathe. After about two months of this it became really boring and the siestas became more frequent. It was then decided that our sergeants' mess was surplus to requirements and that we should transfer to the main mess, a concrete building a little further inland. So the second phase of time-filling began. In the evenings we played endless games of darts and drank whisky and lemonade and smoked. There was no tax on either whisky or cigarettes, so a tot of whisky was the same price as a bottle of lemonade. Drinking whisky on its own would dehydrate you, hence the lemonade. Back home I once tried the combination for old time's sake. It was absolutely disgusting.

Each Sunday evening in the mess there was a game of Bingo. This was for the married NCOs and their wives. I was put in charge of the prizes. A local trader would bring in a selection from his tourist souvenir shop each Sunday and I would lay them out on the billiard table. It was always the same selection. They were laid out in order of price and there was an imaginary line across the prizes set according to the number playing the game. By the time I took over, the popularity of the game was waning and so the price line gradually crept closer to the cheap end thus helping to further the decline. The highlight of the evening was a curry supper.

I suppose because the army had so recently been on active service there was no tradition of going out sightseeing. So I saw nothing of the historical riches of the island. On one occasion it was thought safe to organise a car rally. This allowed for a considerable amount of time-filling in the planning. It was assumed by one driver that since I taught map reading and maths I would be an ideal navigator. The idea was that you would drive round a route and arrive within set times at check points. There was one major problem. It took place at night. I was hopeless and by three o'clock in the morning I was half asleep and more or less lost. Those that know me will know how unsuited I was to the task. Added to that I saw nothing of the island except impressions of dark and silent villages lit only by the headlights of the car.

The only other activity of note was that there was a drama group which all ranks could join. I was cast in a minor part in a play. The only aspect of the part that I remember is that it involved me carrying a supposedly unconscious female character on to the stage. The part was played by someone's wife and in spite of being supposedly unconscious she managed to hug me tightly in a manner that I found faintly disturbing.

In September it rained for the first time since my arrival. We stood out on the veranda of the Education Centre and turned our faces up to the luxury of rain on our faces. Almost immediately the earth came to life and grasses and flowers appeared, a Spring in Autumn.

Just before Christmas I was informed that I was to be sent back home so I found myself once again on the troopship heading for Blighty. We arrived just before Christmas and were immediately given leave, so I set off for home and spent a large part of the rail journey staring out of the window and drinking in greenness.

I cannot begin to describe the comfort it was to arrive back at our two up two down house on St Hubert's Road, Great Harwood and settle into an armchair by the fire. My mother was upset because she was out shopping when I arrived and she had wanted to be there to greet me. I had been away for nine months. You only appreciate later in life what that might mean to a loving parent. Christmas day was my twenty first birthday, a rather subdued affair since I had had little time to reconnect with friends.

I was posted to Catterick Camp in North Yorkshire. I won't bother you with the attempt to make tedium sound interesting. The one bit of luck was that the second lieutenant in the education centre lived in Blackburn and he had a car. For a small fee he gave me a lift home each weekend talking all the way about his dogs. We were not soul mates.

For some reason I cannot fathom, in the August before my demob date in October I was sent back to the Beaconsfield RAEC training centre on a drama course. It turned out to be the most enjoyable week I had spent in the army. I played the lead in 'The Long and the Short and the Tall' by Willis Hall. I have a photograph to prove it.

In September I received notice that the teacher training course at St. Mary's College Strawberry Hill was about to begin. I applied for and was granted early release from the army. This is another of those unforgettable emotional memories, standing on Darlington Station in my civilian clothes with the overwhelming sense that I was free.

At Strawberry Hill (Summary to all who knew her) my subjects were still Maths and Chemistry but I immediately joined the drama society. The University of London Institute of Education Students' Association, ULIESA, organised a one act play competition for the affiliated Teacher Training Colleges. I directed "The Bear" by Anton Chekov. The performances were to take place in our college and a group from Digby Stuart College, a Catholic girl's college in Roehampton came to rehearse on our stage. The director of their play was a very striking girl still bronzed from the summer sun. I was immediately smitten. I

can honestly say the all the best things in my later life had their origins in that moment. She, of course, was completely oblivious to her impending fate and it took some mild stalking and manoeuvring before I finally managed to arrange a date.

Almost twelve months to the day from boarding the troopship home my life, for the first time, had taken on purpose and direction.

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