

I found myself standing on a strip of barren, sandy land. I was wearing an army uniform and there were three stripes on each sleeve. There were shoulder flashes on each shoulder reading RAEC, Royal Army Education Corps. At that moment I was alone. I had travelled there on a troop ship along with hundreds of other soldiers of all ranks. It was 1958 and I was nineteen years old. I had been called up to do my two years' National Service. If all had gone to plan, I would have escaped National Service but a disastrous year at university meant that I was caught in the very last cohort. If I had completed a degree, I would have missed the last call up. My failed university career was a disaster waiting to happen. I had arrived after managing very unimpressive passes at A Level. I was studying for a joint degree in Maths and Chemistry with Physics as a subsidiary course. I had taken these subjects because the alternative was to study either classics or Moderns both groups of subjects in which being a good speller were considered crucial. My spelling was chronically bad and has only improved with the advent of the spell check. I won't go into more detail about the mismanagement of my school career, suffice it to say that I arrived at University doing the wrong subjects and with no idea how to go about studying them or anything else for that matter.

The call up papers arrived in the summer of 1957. I was to report for the army medical in Preston. I passed the medical in spite of poor eyesight and flat feet and was sent in before a board of three officers. I was identified and then one of them asked, "Do you want to join a corps or a regiment."

"I'm sorry", I said, "I don't know the difference between them."

This response clearly irritated the officer. "What are you going to do when you leave the army?" he barked.

"Well, I'm applying for teacher training."

"Right, RAEC."

Notes were made and I was dismissed.

Basic training took place in Lancaster in the barracks of the Kings Own Royal Regiment (Lancaster). Paradoxically these barracks later became a site for a Teacher Training College. Basic training involved learning to obey orders, to present arms and march, to shoot a rifle and to be smart. You were given a pair of new boots which had bobbly surfaces and a very important task was to polish these boots smooth until they shone like black glass, a surprisingly satisfying occupation. Each morning you were on parade and were inspected by the sergeant major. The first order of the day was 'Stand by your beds'. We had to stand to attention whilst our beds and lockers were inspected 'hospital corners' on the sheets and the bedding formed into a cube wrapped neatly in a blanket. Neat was the key word. The army likes 'neat'. Those that know me will know that this was a particular challenge. We would then be out on the parade ground with further attention from the SM. He had a repertoire of sarcastic comments. On one occasion he stared closely at my chin and said. "Did you shave this morning."

"Yes, sir"

"Well stand closer to the razor next time."

The whole of the platoon was destined for the RAEC and another of his favourites was to roar at us that we were all “educated idiots”. You could spend some time deconstructing that phrase but probably just as well to accept that in army terms it was largely true.

Eventually we marched and executed various drills and above all learnt to obey without question and we had our passing out parade.

From there we were all distributed to either corps or regiments and my platoon was sent to the Royal Army Education Corps Headquarters in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire. We were to follow a ten week teacher training course fitting us to teach to the army qualifications imaginatively named, third, second and first class, Third class covered basic numeracy and literacy and some army related thing such as map reading, First class was the equivalent of ‘O’ level and was the qualification which would allow Non Commissioned Officers to apply to become Commissioned Officers. The actual course was not a bad introduction to teaching and included the idea of giving your class activities rather than just presenting from the front.

It was a harsh winter and we were housed in Nissan huts. During the night our noses would run and there would be ice on our pillows in the morning. We still had to parade as private soldiers. The parade ground sloped and was often icy. We would be called to attention and we would begin sliding down the slope. The sergeant major barked “Stand Still! Stand Still!” and most of us managed this, though occasionally some unfortunate would continue the slide. Meals were in the ‘squaddies’ canteen served cafeteria style by other ‘squaddies’ who had chosen the Royal Army Catering Corps as their option.

We also had to do guard duty. For this you had to stay awake all night, guard the gate and occasionally do a tour armed with a heavy stick. Quite sensibly they didn’t trust us with anything more lethal. We were instructed as part of this tour to do a circuit round a strange building. We only saw it in the dark, but it seemed to consist of a large, vaguely pyramidal concrete structure surround by high concrete walls. Between the walls and the structure was a path which we had to patrol. We did this one at a time through the night and it was pitch black and was scary. We were given no information about the purpose of the structure, but this was the late 1950s and nuclear war seemed to be an ever-present threat. We were told on the news that in preparation several “Regional Seats of Government” had been prepared so that if London was hit, governance could be dispersed and continue. We speculated that this structure we guarded with a torch and a heavy stick was one such RSG. I have no idea whether this is true or not, but it seemed to make sense at the time. Advice to ordinary householders in case of an attack was to put brown paper on the windows and hide under the stairs. But if our speculation is correct, we could be safe in the knowledge that government was housed beneath several feet of concrete.

Eventually we completed our course. The lowest rank in the RAEC was that of Sergeant. I assume that army logic dictated that since as teachers we had to tell others what to do, we must have a rank. There was an immediate transformation in our fortunes. As sergeants we had access to the sergeants’ mess with food served by waiters and tables with white tablecloths. The food was prepared by the quality of chefs a rank above those in the canteen and indeed, many members of the RACC later carved out good careers in civilian life. Mercifully, there was no more parading.

We were then posted to various parts of the country or the world. I was posted to Cyprus. Cyprus at that time was a crown colony. Geographically it is close to Turkey but historically had been part of Greece and there were large Turkish and Greek populations. There was an uprising among the Greek population demanding union with Greece AOKA. It was led by one General Grivas. They were rebels against the rule of Britain but also against the counter claim by the Turks that Cyprus should be a Turkish territory. As rebels it was the army's job to hunt them down and to try to prevent atrocities, shootings and bombings etc. Consequently, if you were in the army you were going out to Cyprus on active service. I think there should be a word here about the effect of all this on my parents. I could really only understand this fully once I had watched my own children grow and move off into the world. My mother particularly, who was anxious at the best of times, must have been beside herself with worry. Good parents, of course, hide the depths of their unhappiness from their children especially in the face of the inevitable. I set off to Portsmouth to board a troopship to Cyprus in a state of semi consciousness. One foot went in front of another because that is what you were ordered to do.

On board the troop ship were soldiers of all ranks. Many were, like me, doing their National Service but there were professional soldiers of all ranks including officers with their wives and children. Segregation on board was strict. The lower orders had their bunks and their canteen. We NCOs had or couchettes and a rudimentary mess. The officers and their families had their own facilities. The only overlap came with the children. Each morning they were to attend classes. Simple logic again dictated that as I was in the education corps, I must teach them. The group consisted of children between the ages of about seven to fourteen. I had no experience of teaching children. There were few resources and the older boys informed me that I couldn't tell them what to do because their fathers outranked me. The best that can be said is that I managing to keep them all in one room and for a time prevented them from rampaging round the ship.

We stopped in Gibraltar. We set off to find the apes but caught a bus in the wrong direction. We stopped in Malta where we walked down a road called, think, the Gut and were invited in to be entertained by a variety of females. I didn't see anyone taking up an invitation. One other significant event was that a peace treaty between AOKA and the British government was signed whilst we were on the boat so we were no longer on active service. After five days we arrived in Cyprus and disembarked.

I have no idea how many were on board the ship, but it was a lot. The officers and families were whisked away and the rest of us were lined up on a dusty strip of land facing a number of army tents. Officers emerged from the tents and gradually all who had disembarked were taken off to some allocated destination, except me. For a moment I was entirely alone and then an officer emerged from a tent and said to me, "Who are you again?"

"23590901 Sergeant Cockett sir."

"Ah", he said. "We didn't know you were coming."

"Well" I said, "I'll go back if you like."

He was not amused. It was not neat.

My army career in Cyprus is another story. That's enough for now.