



Military Survey (Geographic) Branch

Royal Engineers Association

Spring 2026 Newsletter – issue 99

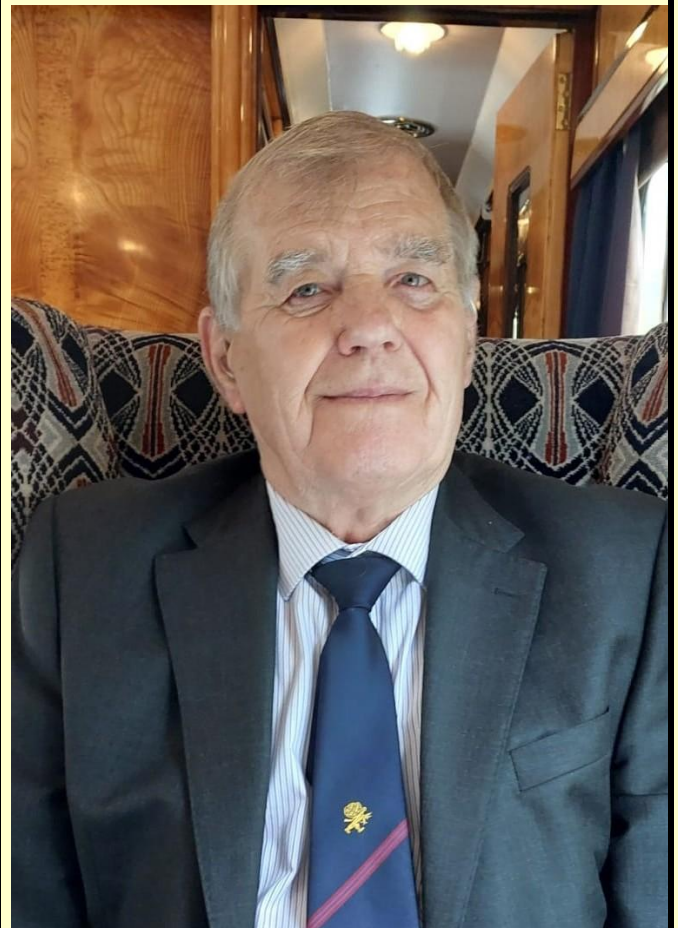
It is with great sadness that we dedicate this edition of the Branch Newsletter to two of our founder members who both passed away in February – Ron Birch and Mick Perry.

Both Ron and Mick played key roles when the Branch was first set up and later, in its running and development. We owe them a great deal.

Ronald 'Ron' Birch
19th February 1935 - 12th February 2026



Michael 'Mick' Perry
1st February 1945 – 26th February 2026



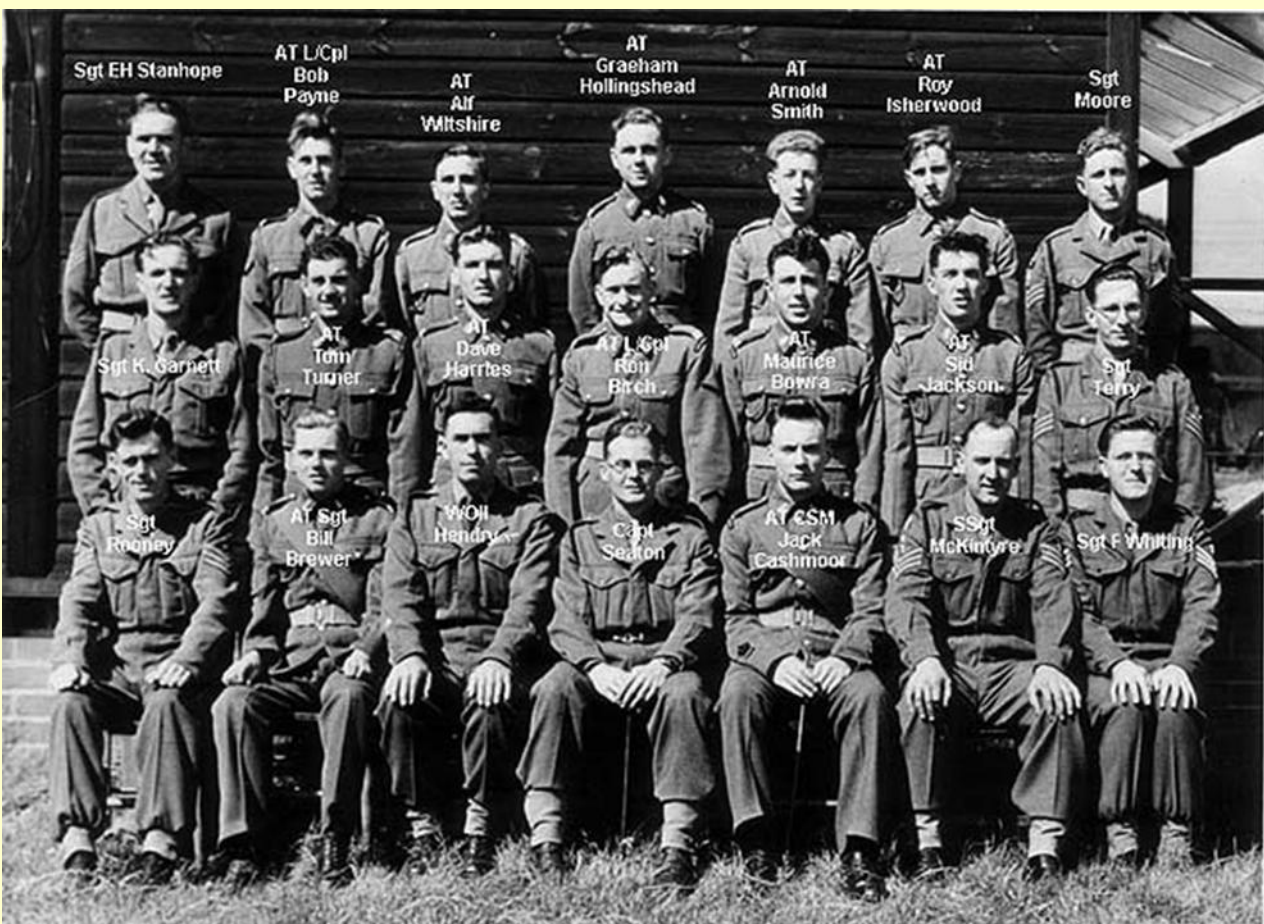
DEATHS OF OLD COMRADES

Ronald 'Ron' Birch – 19th February 1935 – 12th February 2026

Ron died in February, just short of his 91st birthday. Ever efficient, and always willing to help others, Ron answered our request for information to help with an obituary and provided us with the following:

Born in Coventry in 1935, Ron had the dubious distinction of being evacuated twice before he was even six years old, firstly to Leamington Spa, and then when his home was totally destroyed during the Coventry blitz, to the small village of Barwell in Leicestershire.

After being educated at Hinckley Grammar School, he commenced his military career with intake 51B at the Army Apprentices College Harrogate. As a Field Surveyor, he progressed rapidly through the ranks, being promoted to Sergeant within just three years of completing his apprenticeship whilst serving with 84 Field Survey Squadron in Malaya .



Group 51B Survey Apprentices – Ron Birch – centre of the middle row.

His overseas tours included Singapore, Malaya, North Borneo, and Cyprus with numerous overseas detachments. Perhaps his most noticeable one being as the Warrant Officer with the BC4 Team of 512 Specialist Team on the isolated Antarctica Island of South Georgia. South Georgia lies some 2000 miles due east of Cape Horn, covered almost entirely in snow with a mountain spine rising from the Southern Ocean like a misplaced section of the Alps. The island's interior was first crossed, famously and involuntarily, by the famous British Polar Explorer Sir Earnest Shackleton to bring assistance to stranded members of his ill-fated Trans-Antarctic Expedition on Elephant Island.

The survey team consisted of four surveyors with support from REME and ACC personnel. Our task was to observe a satellite circling the globe at a pre-determined height, path and azimuth, the satellite being photographed through a Ballistic Camera as it traversed across its pre-determined celestial path. The photographic plate was exposed for some 30 minutes, being monitored onto an oscilloscope and recorded on brush tape. Afterwards, the plate was developed, and from the coded images it was possible to calculate the time of each star and satellite. Results were passed on a weekly basis to Washington by radio.

Ron served two tours as an instructor and Warrant Officer at the Army Apprentices College, Chepstow where, whilst commanding a Troop of Apprentices, he became the first Military person to assist in the immediate aftermath of the Aberfan Tragedy when 116 children and 28 adults lost their lives.

In the dual appointment as RSM / SMI at the Royal School of Military Survey, he was commissioned and posted to 42 Survey Engineer Regiment, Barton Stacey, where he served in a number of different roles including as Troop Officer Print, Carto and Field Survey Squadrons, often standing in as the Regiment's Adjutant.

Academically, he was an Associate and later Member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, and as a founder member of the Military Survey Branch of the Royal Engineers Association, he was an active participant throughout his life.

A qualified Association Football Referee, he progressed through each stage to the Football Combination, where he officiated at many Football League venues. He officiated between the French and Belgium Armies and the Army Cup Final.

On leaving the service, he became the Deputy Area Surveyor with the Opencast Executive of British Coal covering five Midland Counties, and as coaling receded, he joined Leicester City Council, becoming the City's Principle Land Surveyor until his retirement.

Married to a local girl, Nita, they were blessed with two children Nigel and Helen and Granddaughter Emma. Great Grand Children followed later, carrying on the Birch dynasty.

He leaves Nita and his loving family and will be sadly missed by many members of the Military Survey.

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Ron was correct with his final words. He certainly will be missed by many members of Military Survey. He also leaves a legacy within the Branch, where he was one of the founding members. He was the Vice-Chairman and Welfare Member when the Branch first formed and was always an active contributor, participant and firm supporter of the Branch and its activities.

Although not mentioned in his obituary, he was also a very keen supporter of the Military Survey Late Entry Officers' Club, and their longest serving President (1994 – 2006). Dave Campey, the current president, remembers the kindness, help and support Ron gave him when he took up the position.

Paddy Hughes says that

Ron set a great example to us all. He was a gentleman, a leader, a field surveyor, a true soldier and friend. Rest in peace until we join you.

John Croft is just one of many who expressed their sadness and offered condolences on hearing of Ron's passing.....

It was indeed a shock to learn of Ron's death. Ron was one of my Troop Commanders in 13 Repru Sqn, and we have kept up with Christmas cards each year ever since.

Ian Thurgate remembers Ron as.....

a lovely man, a true gentleman and great company. He contributed much to the Branch and was always appreciative of it and all it does. He was a good orator, always giving interesting and funny speeches at the LEO Dinners. He will be greatly missed.

Tom Benkjer said.....

This is sad news. Ron was a mainstay of Survey and the branch, and will be sorely missed. If you need a standard bearer for his funeral, I will do my best to help out there.

Ron's funeral

Unfortunately, Tom wasn't able to parade with the Branch Standard at Ron's funeral and regrettably, none of the Committee was able to attend. We are very grateful to Gerry Scott, Secretary of Lichfield and Tamworth Branch, who very kindly paraded their standard to help provide a proper and fitting farewell to Ron.

We, and Ron's family, are also grateful to Maj James 'Nessie' Smith, and WO2 (SSM) Scott Vickery, who represented 42 Engineer Regiment (Geographic) at the funeral.

John Adlington, along with seven other old colleagues of Ron, did attend the funeral and kindly provided the following for the newsletter.

The Celebration of the Life of Ron Birch was held at the Heart of England Crematorium, Nuneaton, on 23 March 2026. The hearse carrying Ron was escorted into the chapel by standard bearers from the REA and RBL.

Representing 42 Engineer Regiment (Geographic), were the Second-in-Command, Major Nessie Smith, and WO2 (SSM) Scott Vickery. Alongside family and friends, a number of Ron's military colleagues were present to pay their respects including John Siddell, Mick Clowes, Stew Roy, Dick Kingswell, David Young, Jim Steger and Les Morgan.



Ron's hearse being escorted into the chapel.

Michael 'Mick' Perry – 1st February 1945 – 26th February 2026

Mick Perry started his Army career as a Topographic and Trigonometrical Surveyor when he joined the Army Apprentice School, Beachley, as part of 61C Group.



61C Field Survey Course – Mick back row 1st from the right

Others: Left to Right: Frank Wilkinson (Course Instructor), MT driver, Jim Harker, John Campbell, Bob Bailey, Alan Beeston, Bob Avenell, Jock Roger, Mick Hinton, Mick Perry

After leaving Chepstow and completing his basic Sapper training his first posting was to Barton Stacey.

In the late 60s he was posted out to Singapore but spent much of his time there deployed to Borneo, where he grew the first of several beards, and also got the prized “fishhook” tattoo, carried out using thorns and sticks by the local tribesmen.

He was posted to 13 Sqn at Barton Stacey in the early 1970s and was Tp Sgt for a successful deployment to Sharjah UAE under EX SAWYER. At the time, although neighbouring Dubai was developing as a Free port, it was still a small city – the tallest building was only 3 or 4 stories.



Mick sporting a beard and that famous fringe

Mike Stanbridge was a young Troop Officer in 13 Sqn at the time and says that he wouldn't have managed without Mick! On one occasion getting Mike out of a hole....literally. During a recce in Norway, Mike had strayed too far and ended up sunk up to his chest in snow. He wonders how he would ever have got out had it not been for Mick crawling across the snow and helping to dig and pull him out.

Mick's career continued with postings to 512 STRE, the Regiment and then his Survey Staff Specialist Course, which widened his employability and posting options. He went on to become QMSI Field at RSMS and was then posted to HQ BAOR for his final tour before commissioning.

During one tour at Feltham, he volunteered to take on the role of SO2 Ops at the time of the first Gulf War, and his performance there was such that he was awarded the MBE.

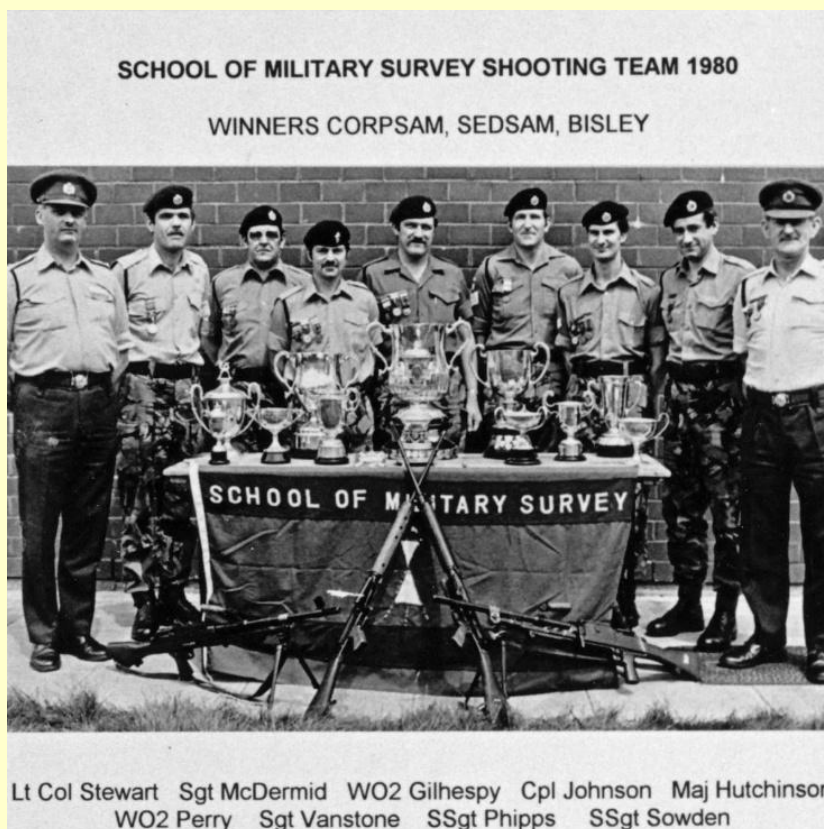
He recounted returning from Australia, where he was then filling the Exchange post, to receive the award from Her Majesty the Queen.

Whilst making the presentation, Her Majesty said, "I understand that you've returned from Australia to receive this." To which he replied "Yes, ma'am, and all the Australians I know send their best wishes". The Queen was amused and laughed, which Mick thought was nice.



Mick and his wife, Pat, with the MBE

Mick was an excellent shot and was a regular member of the unit shooting teams. He was a member of the 1980 SMS team which won the Corps Skill at Arms and South East District Skill at Arms competition, and later, along with Vince Grealy and John Fennell, won the Kola Goldfields Cup at Bisley.



Mick retired from the Army in 2000. It had always been his intention to retire fully after his service and spend his time on the golf course. He did, but only on Mondays to Fridays - He always kept the weekend and holidays for his family.

Notwithstanding his time on the golf course, he was also a case worker for SSAFA for 15 years and helped many ex-Forces personnel and their families through difficult times.

We must also record that he was a founder member of Military Survey (Geographic) Branch and, for 20 years, was the functions organiser. Even after he gave up that position, he was always interested in what the Branch was up to, and fully supported its activities.



Mick was great fun to be around. He had a great sense of humour, a good nature and sensible outlook on life. May he rest in peace.

Mick's Funeral

Mick's funeral took place at the West Berkshire Crematorium on Tuesday 25th March. An Honour Guard of serving and ex-Branch Committee Members lined the entrance to the crematorium. The crematorium was full of mourners - stood two deep at the back and with some down the sides of the room. Over 50 members of the Branch were present and others watched the service online – a sure sign of how popular and well-liked Mick was.

John 'Paddy' Hughes gave a very moving tribute to Mick, his very close friend for over 50 years, and Ian Thurgate spoke of Mick's career, quoting just some of the many tributes and memories that people had sent in.

Having said their goodbyes, the mourners left the crematorium to the sounds of "Wand'rin' Star", a very fitting piece of music for an ex-Field Surveyor!

Tributes to Mick

A great many people, Members and others, sent in their condolences and memories of Mick, too many to be repeated here. They have all been passed to Mick's wife, Pat, daughter, Sue, and son, Richard. However, extracts from some are given below:

John Fennell:

'I was very upset to hear of Mick's death - in fact I have to admit tears in the eye. Mick and I were always great mates, and indeed the running joke every time we met was that I was "Mick Perry's love child" as we looked alike, often with similar mops of hair and shared the same sense of humour and indeed view of the world.'

Bryan Garvan:

'Mick..... was always good company. He was quite a personality, and he will be sorely missed – a cliché, I know, but one that happens to be true in Mick's case.'

Tom Benkjer:

'Such sad news. Another stalwart gone. RIP Mick.'

John Campbell:

'I was deeply saddened to hear of his passing, though grateful that it was peaceful. My heartfelt condolences go to Pat and to all the family.'

Chris Cleeton:

'I have known Mick since September 1961 when we arrived at The Apprentice College Chepstow, living in the same large room of a wooden H Block housing about thirty boisterous young men for our first year of service.

Mick was one of the few people who never changed, which to me was an endearing attitude.'

Basil John Howard 30th June 1928 – 29th November 2025

We were recently informed, by HQ REA, of the passing of Basil Howard on 29th November last year. Although he was affiliated to the Branch since 2005, we sadly know nothing about him as we can find no details of him in our records.

Given his date of birth, 1928, he could have been an Apprentice at the time of WW2 or possibly a National Serviceman just afterwards. If any of our older Members can provide us with any details about Basil we'd be pleased to record them in a future newsletter.

A letter of condolence has been sent to his family.



42 ENGINEER REGIMENT (GEOGRAPHIC) **NEWS**



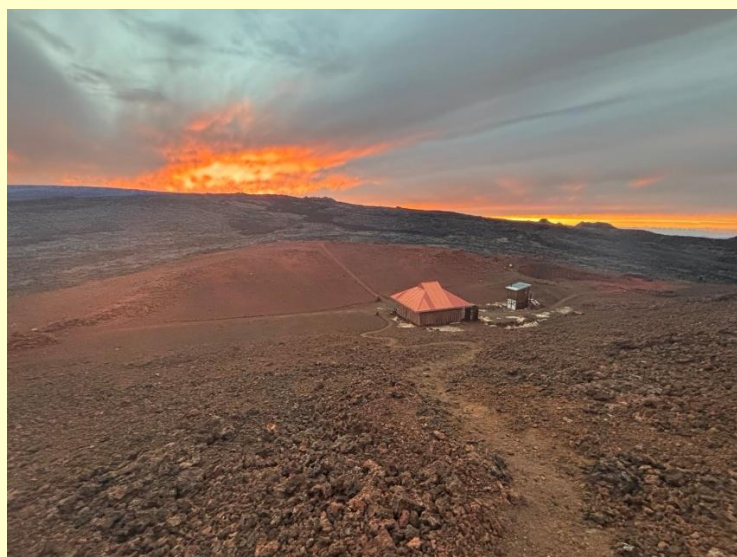
EXERCISE ROYS PACIFIC

In October 2025, a ten-person team from 14 Geographic Squadron, 42 Engineer Regiment, undertook a six-day expedition to Hawaii on Exercise ROYS PACIFIC. Their objective was to complete a self-supported ascent and summit traverse of the world's largest volcano, Mauna Loa, while establishing a new route across the 2022 eruption lava flows that had destroyed the original trail.



The team arrives at Honolulu

The terrain proved demanding from the outset. The team advanced across vast expanses of unstable pāhoehoe lava, where progress was slow and footing unpredictable. What began as a planned trekking exercise quickly evolved into a test of endurance, resilience, and precise navigation.

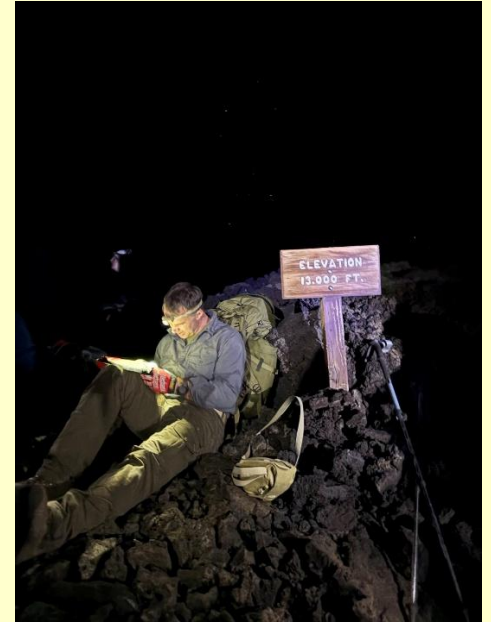


Red Hill Cabin Sunset

After deploying to Red Hill Cabin (3,059m) on Day 1, the team conducted an acclimatisation climb onto the recent lava flows before returning to the hut. During this phase, they were also treated to an impressive eruption from Kīlauea, observing lava fountains from approximately 15 km away.



Team navigation



The OC navigating!

Day 3 involved a prolonged 18-hour push to the summit cabin. En route, the team reconnoitred and marked a new route across the lava fields, constructing cairns to aid future navigation. The summit day on Day 4 required a steady 10-mile traverse of the Moku'aweoweo Caldera. Despite the effects of altitude and the challenging terrain, all ten members successfully reached the summit of Mauna Loa (4,169m) on 20 October before returning to the summit cabin in darkness.



Team at Cauldera

The descent was made via the established Ainapo Trail to avoid recrossing the recent lava flows. This proved equally demanding, requiring careful movement over several miles of unstable 'A'ā lava. The expedition strengthened core skills in planning, acclimatisation, load carriage, and navigation in complex environments. It proved both challenging and rewarding, and marked a notable mountaineering achievement for the team, who became the first military group to reach the summit and the first documented team to do so via the 2022 trail.



A team from 14 Geographic Squadron, the first military group to reach the summit of Mauna Loa, Hawaii



Team at Pearl Harbour



Brecon to Cardiff Ultra Marathon

43 Miles of History, Hills & Heart



The REA (Svy) Branch was proud to provide a grant to WO2 (QMSI) Joe Roberts of 135 Geographic Squadron to part-fund his entry into the Brecon to Cardiff Ultra Marathon - a demanding 43-mile endurance race through the Taff Valley. Competing against approximately 300 runners, Joe delivered an outstanding performance, finishing in an impressive 3rd place.

Below, Joe shares his personal account of the race, offering an insight into the physical and mental challenge behind this remarkable achievement.

On 1 March 2026, after a 4am alarm call, I made my way to the start line in Brecon - tired and slightly bleary-eyed, but excited for the 43-mile challenge ahead. At 0800 sharp, the countdown concluded and runners set off along the historic Taff Trail.

The Route

The race begins in Brecon and follows the Taff Trail almost all the way to the finish. Much of the course traces the path of the former Taff Vale Railway and the Glamorganshire Canal - once vital transport routes carrying coal and iron from Merthyr Tydfil and the Rhondda valleys to the docks of Cardiff and Barry. Though long disused, these historic corridors now provide a scenic yet demanding running route through the narrow Taff Valley.

From Brecon, the course heads east along the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal towards Talybont-on-Usk. In these early stages, I lost a few places but remained disciplined, determined not to get carried away with pacing so early in an ultra-distance event.

The route then climbs gradually towards Torpantau - five miles of steady incline into relentless rain to reach the high point of the course. The peaceful canal paths quickly gave way to the reality of the challenge. By the summit, having managed the climb well, I had worked my way into the top five positions.

The course passes the tranquil Pontsticill Reservoir and runs alongside the Brecon Mountain Railway, before descending into Merthyr Tydfil at the halfway point — tired, soaked through, and briefly contemplating life choices. Approaching the town centre, sweeping views open to reveal the impressive Cefn Coed Viaduct and Cyfarthfa Castle, stark reminders of the region's proud industrial heritage.

South of Merthyr, the route passes through Aberfan, a place of reflection and respect. Despite fatigue, it was impossible not to pause mentally and remember the young lives lost in the tragic events that occurred there. It was a sobering moment within an otherwise fiercely competitive race.

From there, the final 20 miles followed the valley south toward the finish at Nantgarw.



The Final Push

Much of the latter stages were spent running alone, constantly questioning how close my nearest rivals might be behind me. That uncertainty provided the motivation to dig deep and maintain focus all the way to the line.

Ultra marathons are unique events. Age and gender cease to be perceived limitations; resilience, preparation and mindset are what matter. Throughout the race, competitors showed genuine concern for one another. Regardless of position or fatigue, there was always a word of encouragement or a simple fist bump — a shared understanding that we were all enduring the same challenge.

In the end, it came down to putting one foot in front of the other, on repeat, for 6 hours, 13 minutes and 21 seconds. That effort secured 3rd place out of approximately 300 runners. A result I am proud to accept.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Royal Engineers Association for their support and funding. Their assistance made participation in this fantastic event possible and is greatly appreciated.

Joe Roberts

Posting Travels

14 Field Survey Squadron, Dortmund, West Germany to 42 Regiment at Zyyi, Cyprus – September 1957

In September 1957, L/Cpl Robin (Chalky) White and Cpl Ted May were transferred from 14 Field Survey Squadron, which was then based in Dortmund, West Germany, to 42 Regiment, stationed at Zyyi in Cyprus. Ted recounts the story of his journey, travelling by motorbike from Dortmund to Cyprus

We had always been keen motorcyclists and therefore wanted to travel between the units by motor bike. We wanted to make our own way and realised that it was not going to be easy to get permission, but we eventually managed to persuade our commanders that we had all the details, routes and were capable of completing the bookings and arriving safely.

Initially, we returned to the UK for embarkation leave and then had to report to Barton Stacey for a couple of weeks whilst we waited for our movement orders. During this time, we were given normal routine military tasks. Barton Stacey was a transit camp for personnel posted abroad and a demobilization unit. (Military Survey had no presence at Barton Stacey at this time). We arrived in the UK via a Troop Train from Dortmund to the Hook of Holland. We then travelled by Troop Ship to Harwich and on to King's Cross Station before we started our leave. This was a lengthy trip before we even contemplated the move to Cyprus! We had to stay in transit accommodation at Barton Stacey, but it was finally agreed that we would have two weeks to get to Cyprus but were not allowed to visit Greece or Egypt because of the political situation.

Our option was to take a road trip to Brindisi in Italy and then travel to Cyprus by sea. As you will see, our orders were not quite followed to the letter! We were to carry our military kit and civilian clothing ready to start work in Cyprus, so as you will see from the photographs our motorbikes were well laden.

Both of us managed to purchase new motorbikes whilst we were on embarkation leave. I bought an Aerial 350cc from Chatham in Kent, whilst Chalky purchased a Douglas Dragonfly at Kings in London. These bikes remained faithful servants throughout our tour of duty in Cyprus.



*Ted May sat on
Chalky's Douglas Dragonfly motorbike*

After a road trip to Dover, we sailed over to Calais, France and then headed towards Switzerland and 'free' camped all the way. I am sure you can understand that the option to carry belongings was extremely limited. As money was extremely tight, we were lucky enough to obtain some compositions but relied upon the food we had packed in the UK. We had to make do and only had one proper meal, and that was at Brindisi in Italy. Our first camping stopover was as we travelled through France and on to Switzerland, fortunately the weather at this stage was fine.

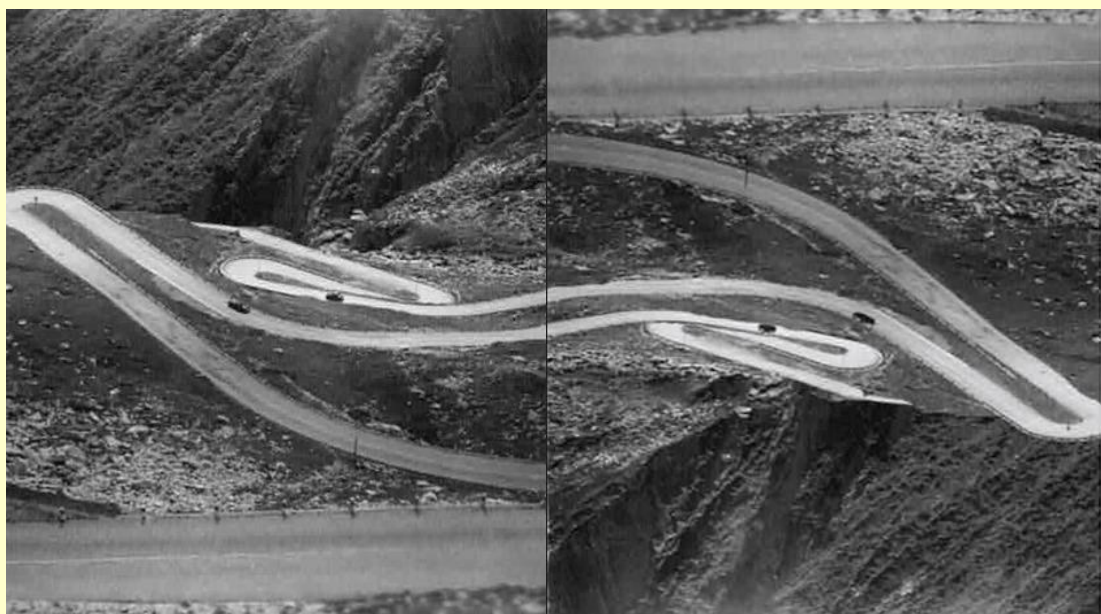


On the way to Cyprus September 1957. Switzerland and the rain with Chalky White

As we travelled on, after the stop, the weather was atrocious and it rained consistently until we crossed over the St Gotthard Pass from Switzerland into the lovely warm sunshine of Italy. Our second camping stopover was somewhere near Milan at some bombed ruins.



Looking back on the climb up the Gotthard Pass, with still some way to go



The Gotthard Pass, Switzerland, near the top 1957



Over the top of the St Gotthard Pass and into sun

Travelling down the coast for our third stopover, we camped at a very small farm where we were able to converse with the farmer because he spoke perfect English. He told us he had been a prisoner of war in Scotland and had enjoyed his stay. The following day was very interesting and we made good time to Brindisi, where we would depart for Athens by sea.



Ted May by the sea at Brindisi, Italy



'Agamemnon' the small cruise ship, that would take us to Cyprus

We watched the motor bikes get loaded onto the 'Agamemnon', a small cruise ship. We were deck cargo, the cheapest way to travel, and our companions were mainly German students. There was a canteen on board for deck passengers, but once again we went hungry because our money was fast running out.

Continuing to Cyprus via Greece, Port Said, Alexandria and Beirut we did land in Greece but not in Egypt! We had a good time on that trip, but it could have been better if we hadn't been so broke and had more money!

We arrived at Limassol in Cyprus and were met at the port side by our Harrogate (Army Apprentice) friend, Dave Guest, who was driving a 3-ton truck complete with a mounted Bren gun. At least we knew we would have a safe trip to the Regiment in a well-armed vehicle. The motorbikes were impounded by the Cypriot Customs, and it took weeks to get them back. Our land trip had taken about 4 days, and then there was 6 days on our Mediterranean cruise to Cyprus. By the time we reached Zyyi, we had been travelling for 11 days and I estimate we travelled over 1175 miles by road.



42 Regiment Guardroom, Zyyi Camp, Cyprus



My tent and the WO's and Sgts Mess

After the comfort of 14 Squadron's accommodation, a tent at Zyyi Camp was a surprise but at least there were no cold German winters and you could make them very comfortable. Before I could settle down at Zyyi, I was sent to Limassol 3 Map Depot as the discipline NCO. I found it difficult to understand why at first, but soon started counting maps and therefore didn't have to give it much thought.



On my Aerial motorbike at 3 Map Depot, Polimedia



*My 21st birthday at 3 Map Depot
(17 Dec 1957)
Daily Mail cut out of Brigitte Bardot*

Luckily, I was back at Zyyi by December where life revolved around work; the troop was fully employed, mainly producing reprints and we all worked shifts. I was promoted to Sergeant in February 1958 at the age of 21 years and 2 months, and moved into another tent! I was very happy to be put in charge of the Proofing Department, Graining and Paper Store. The Proofing Department was a mix of power-assisted presses and hand presses.

The Warrant Officer's and Sergeant's Mess did have a very good stone building that housed the bar, lounge, dining room and a very nice garden.



Sgt Ted May in the Mess Garden, the only place in camp with a green lawn and walls covered in grape vines

I soon found out that as a SNCO, duties were all part of life at Zyyi and included orderly sergeant, guarding the Middle East Arabic Broadcasting Station and manning a transformer station on a very isolated hill. The latter was surrounded by wire and detectors that would give a location of movement outside; these had to be recorded throughout the night, and some very interesting entries were recorded. On one occasion, my lookout guard member found the alarm switch 'on', so I told him to switch it 'off'. It turned out that the switch had been wired incorrectly, and this meant the alarms in security sounded, and we quickly had a visit from the Guard Officer asking the location of the terrorists!



In the hills of Cyprus – L to R: Ted May, Chalky White, Ken Towsey, N/K

Possibly the highlight of the working week would be the cinema show put on by our trained projectionist in a Nissen hut. There was also a rather rare CSE (Combined Services Entertainment) show, which was held in the gym that was still under construction - the female actors were always very popular!

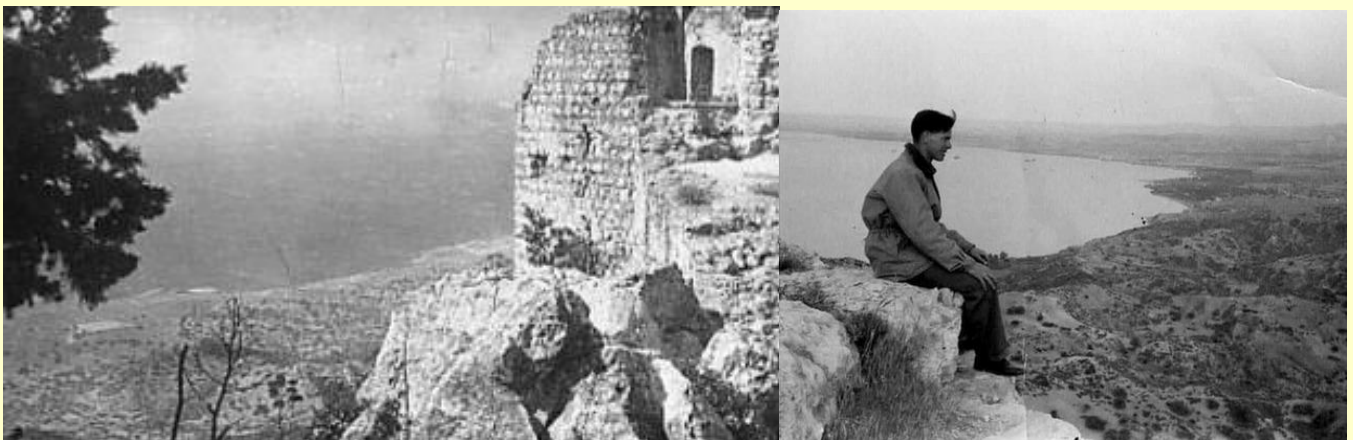
I remember well one evening, whilst I was enjoying a quiet drink in the Mess, that the fire alarm sounded. One of my departments was the graining shop, and I could see belching smoke pouring from the building. I arrived to see the fire team with a large foam extinguisher filling the graining shop. Fortunately, the damage turned out to be minor, as the whole plate-graining process involves a lot of water.

During my tour of duty, I produced a printed map of Cyprus which was a direct copy of one made by Mercator in 1631. I covered the story of the map's production in our Autumn 2024, Issue 93 newsletter.

All round, Zyyi was a good posting and on occasions I would have the chance to explore the Island on my motorbike. I loved to get out of camp at times when there was no trouble using my bike, a map, one blanket and some food. Unfortunately, Chalky and myself never seemed to have the time off together to get many trips into Cyprus - possibly with me being a Sgt and a different trade did not help.



A lone trip towards the Pan Handle and ruined castles with my Aerial motorcycle



Kantara Castle

When I arrived at Kantara Castle, it was deserted and there were no villages nearby, so I explored as much as I could. I found under the Castle, via passages, the Cisterns which were, at that time, full of water and looked drinkable. The views were outstanding and a look at 'Google' will give more details.

Throughout my tour in Cyprus, I was pleased that my motorbike only broke down once, and that was whilst I was way up in the hills. I was on my way back to Zyyi when my bike came to a sudden stop, and I soon found out that I had engine fault. There was nothing I could do but hope on some local help, but there was no nearby village. I decided to push my bike to the rise in front, just as I was about to start, a motorbike appeared over the top with 2 young local lads on board. They were a great help and informed me of a Police Station, just over the rise. It was an easy push to the top

and there was a wire compound surrounding a manned Police station. The Police were very helpful and soon contacted the owner of a truck that was going to Limassol and passing the turn for Zyyi.

I left my bike at Police station and was soon in the cab of the truck with a very sad-faced driver who did not offer much conversation. I arrived in Camp that evening and then wondered how to get my bike back to Zyyi. Fortunately, one of the few living in Mess members was the MT Sgt who not only arranged to collect it from the Police station, but said he would also speak to a REME Cpl he knew at Episkopi. After he carried out the repairs, he informed me that the bike had dropped the exhaust valve, which had damaged the head and piston. On completion of the repair, I was pleasantly surprised at the very low repair cost. All round it was lucky the island was on a short truce at the time, or I could still be in the hills!

My bike returned with me to England by ship as I was posted back to the London College of Print for a year in 1959. I was able to park my bike opposite the Union Jack Club, which was my home for a year.

An interesting note are some facts researched by my son, Andrew, who has identified that Chalky's bike with a registration number of TYP 217, is still on the road and has had a complete rebuild. It was, however, unfortunately painted in the wrong colours. It has sold for £7,000 but was mixed up with another Douglas with one digit difference. My bike's registration was 737 BKE and is still being used in the London area.

Ted May

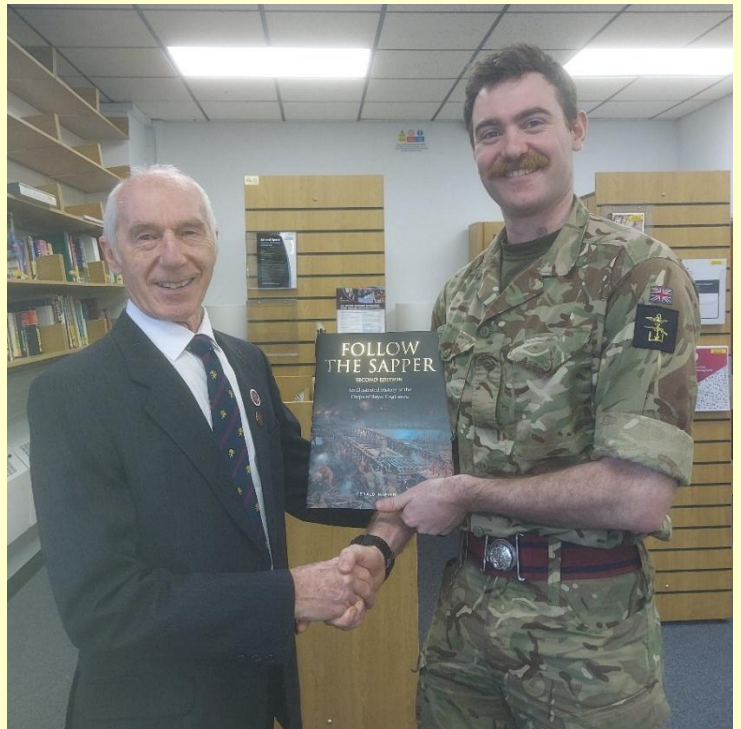
Soldiers' Soldier Award – No 42 ME Geo Tech 2-1 Course

29th January 2026 was the last day of No 42 ME Geo Tech 2-1 Course and along with the presentations for the best student and the Jim Walke prize, the Soldiers' Soldier Award was made. Members will, by now, be familiar with the award and how the winner is determined.

For No 42 Course, the winner was Sapper George Gibbons pictured here receiving a copy of "Follow the Sapper" together with a cash prize of £75 from the Branch Secretary.

If Spr Gibbons looks familiar to readers, it is no surprisehe won the Soldiers' Soldier prize when on his 0-2 Course in July 2023!! This is the first time such an event has occurred, but one which surely demonstrates George's true character!

Fortunately, since George's first course, HQ REA has agreed to provide the winners of the award with a copy of "Follow the Sapper" in keeping with other Sapper trade courses, and so George won't be building a collection of copies of "The Regiment that Mapped the World" the previous prize.



Spr George Gibbons receiving his Soldiers' Soldier prize from Ted Davies at the end of No 57 ME Geo Tech 0-2 Cse

“My Life in the Army – Working in Berlin” by Jack Crompton

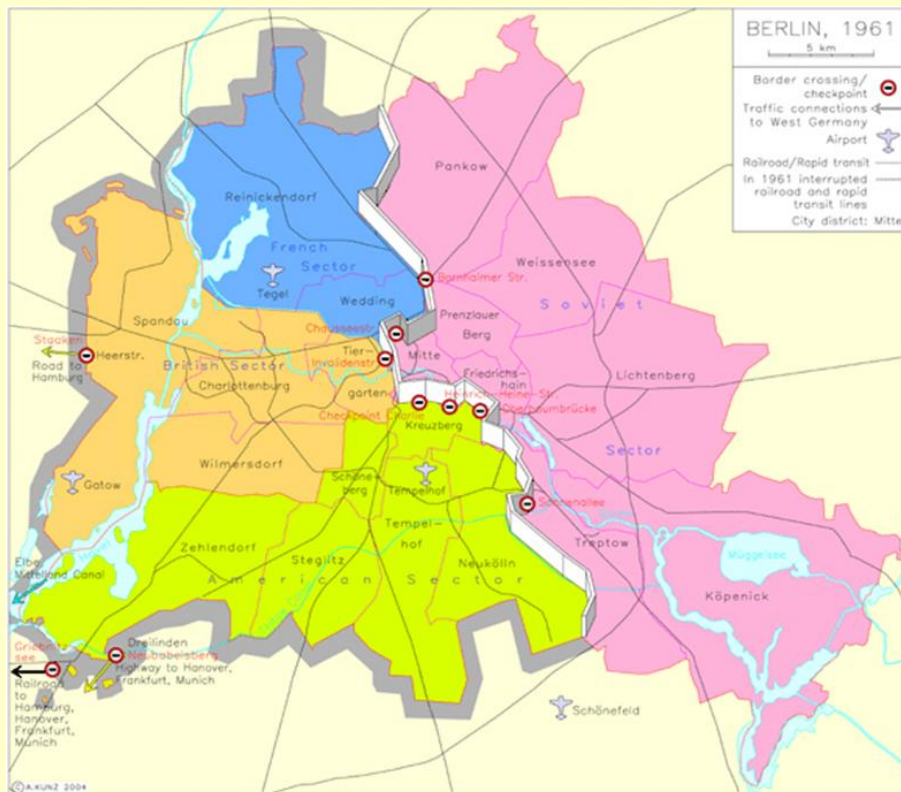
Jack was a Field Surveyor who joined as an Adult Entry soldier in the 1960s. This is the second part of his observations whilst serving.

I worked with a team, in Berlin in the early 1970s as a Royal Engineer Map Maker. The task was to map an area in Berlin called the Eiskeller. This was a small area that was surrounded by East Berlin property but owned by West Berliners, who could not access it. And vice versa on other properties; this made for a very complicated border. The idea was for them all to be surveyed and the East and West authorities could then work out a swap system that smoothed out the border; it would also give the rightful owners accessible property on their side of the border. This particular task took us about two weeks in the middle of winter.

Berlin winters are COLD. The temperature, whilst we were there, never rose above minus eight degrees Celsius. The temperature at midday was often -12 °C. I went out to walk to a friend's house one night about half a kilometre away; the temperature was -20 °C. I was wearing a sheepskin jacket and crimplene trousers. My legs should have frozen solid, but there was not a wisp of wind. Therefore, there was no wind chill factor, and I got away with it. On a brisk walk, it did not feel that cold.

Two days before we arrived, it had snowed about two or three centimetres. It never snowed while we were there, and when we left, there was very little snow to be seen. This was due to sublimation.

No one was allowed into the Eiskeller without an official Military Police (MP) escort. The British Red Caps were recognised and respected by Allied and Russians alike and were always asked to mediate in any confrontation. We had two of them to take us into, stay with us and escort us out of the Eiskeller again each day. We were effectively working under the auspices of the MPs.



Working was the operative word. We worked all daylight hours every day until the job was finished; we had the last day off before we returned to West Germany. That day, the MPs escorted us, in two of their minibuses, into East Berlin for a touristy 'look see' round the Eastern sector of the City.

The four powers in Berlin were: France, USA, Britain, and Russia. After the war, all four were ostensibly allies in Berlin, and any service personnel could move around anywhere in Berlin – but it was not quite that easy. It was in West Berlin but there was a bit more to it, to travel into East Berlin. We crossed into the East via 'Checkpoint Charlie' and had to be properly dressed in our best uniforms. Not the warm 'combat kit and Parker's' we normally used to work in, but No 2 dress, no coats.

Although we were on a tourist jaunt and, with the MPs could go anywhere, we would only stay outside the vehicle for a few minutes at a time before we would have been frozen stiff. So, the trip was a series of; drive to a location, disembark, quick 'look-see', back into the warm vehicle again or a shop or public building. The longest we were outside was when we visited the Soviet War Memorial at Treptow, which was impressive. The day was interesting and good fun, knowing we were in what, to civilians, would have been forbidden territory.

One of the officers liked the East Berlin opera and regularly visited to see a performance. He always went in Mess dress and with his wife. There was never any problem. This was allowed by the four powers and a fun way of exercising our rights to move around East Berlin. The following day we returned by train to our Barracks at Ratingen, near Düsseldorf in West Germany. I made one other trip to Berlin to attend a Swimming Instructors course, but that was another time, another winter, and another story.

Driving Test.

I failed my first driving test, and I have a fairly good idea why. Part way through the test we were travelling alongside a long line of parked cars. I was trying to keep to the left even though there was nothing coming in the opposite direction. At one point the instructor, who had his elbow resting through the open window, withdrew it as we went past these cars. I was obviously too close. I was taken back to my home by my instructor because he would not allow me to drive home after the test; he was not best pleased at my failure. He just dropped me off, and I never saw him again. Nice fellow.

At that time, I had a Henkel – a three-wheeled, bubble car, which was a side-by-side driver and passenger type and had the same driving controls as a conventional car: clutch, brake and accelerator pedals, steering wheel, four forward gears and one reverse and a hand brake. The door was hinged at the front. I was allowed in law to drive this on my own with a Provisional licence as long as I had 'L' plates on the car as it was classed as a motorcycle with a sidecar. It had a 350cc engine and could do 90 miles per hour downhill all out, but only 50 MPH on the flat, providing there was no headwind. These two speeds came from my own experimentation, not from the handbook! As a learner I was not allowed to reverse the car using the engine - there was a restraining plate over the reverse gear to prevent this.

The comedy was that if one parked this vehicle up to a wall or some object at the front, one could not get out of the car because the door opened to the front, for the one or two people that it could carry, to get out. As one could not legally reverse, it one was trapped inside. The restraining plate over the reversing gear was not fixed down, so the procedure for reversing as a learner was: look all around carefully for police. If no cops, then remove reverse gear restraining plate, select reverse gear, reverse, select first gear, replace reverse gear restraining plate and drive off.

After I was dropped off by my 'oh so nice' driving instructor. I jumped in my little bubble car and drove to the hair dressing salon where my Mother worked. I parked up, not against a wall, and went

in to see my Mother. I had a big grin on my face, and she looked at me and said, "you passed then?" I said, "No I didn't." She said, "Yes you did, I can tell by your face." She would not believe me, thinking that I was kidding her, until I produced the driving test failure certificate. She said, "then why are you grinning?" I said, "...because having just failed my driving test, I have immediately and legally, driven myself alone in my car over to see you. That to me is a ridiculous situation".

The second time I took my driving test was on the fifth of November 1974. I specifically remember the date because one of the questions the examiner asked me at the end of the test was: what makes the roads slippery? I answered ice and he asked, "Anything else?" indicating around and there were leaves on the ground. I said that leaves were dangerous in the autumn for walking and cars. We as kids used to fill our Guy Fawkes effigies with leaves. Hence, how I remember the date.

I was serving in Germany at the time of this test and I came home for two weeks leave to stay with my Mother. Mum said that I could have her car as she was now not happy driving - it worried her. She was only 56, but decided that she was too old to drive. That was only an excuse because she learned to drive late in life and was never a confident driver, and as the roads got more and more congested, the more she disliked driving. The deal was that if I could pass my test, then I could take the car back to Germany at the end of my leave, as a present from Mum. The car was a Mini Countryman and was in fairly good condition. As far as I was concerned, it would be wonderful and my freedom from public transport.

I contacted a driving instructor and had an initial lesson for him to assess my ability to drive as I had taken my test once already; all be it a good few years in the past. He told me how many lessons he thought I needed, and I doubled the number and then dropped the bomb shell that I wanted a test within the two weeks. He said that that would not be possible - the waiting time was much longer than that. I said that I was a soldier on leave from Germany, and that this was the only time I had. He said that could make a difference, but the test may be in a different town to the one I would be practising in. I said that I would take what I could get. He also said that the times of some of the lessons may be awkward to get that many lessons in the time available, and some may be double lessons. I agreed to all this and said that I was on leave with one objective: to pass that test.

As I had several double lessons, he took me further afield and even taught me how to smoke in the car safely, or relatively safely by modern-day standards! He said that I was ready for the test halfway through both my leave and the lessons and that I had a test date. I continued with all the lessons to make sure.

After the test and the question, about the leaves, from the examiner he said, "I am happy to tell you that you have passed your driving test. What is your first name? Without thinking, because I was so relieved, I automatically said, "Jack". By that time, I had been 'Jack' for nine years. That was to cause some interesting moments later in my life because Jack appeared on my driving licence and John was on my passport.

The car was mine and the first thing I did was to go for a long drive on my own, over two hundred miles, to get used to the car and driving long distances. I would be driving on my own to Germany in two days, when my leave was over. I remember the muscles in my right shin aching after that long drive, but it did get me used to the car. Driving on the right side of the road would not be a problem. I had lived in Germany for five years by that time, and I was used to being on that side of the road. I had been a passenger and navigator for all that time, and the road signs and rules of the road were second nature to me now. I had driven both the Land Rover and the three-ton Army Bedford four-wheel drive lorry. Not legally, of course, but there were times when the opportunity arose, previously, especially in Thailand. The lorry was known as a 'three tonner' because that is what its designated weight limit was over rough terrain but on the roads it could carry seven and a half tons.

I arrived back at my unit, 14 Squadron, in Roy Barracks, Ratingen, near Dusseldorf, Germany and started my temporary task of the Sergeant-Major's Clerk. It was noted that I was now driving around in my own car and had obtained a British Forces Germany (BFG) Licence, which was not difficult - therefore, I could drive military vehicles. Two weeks after I arrived back from leave, the Squadron was to go on exercise. With the French no less! Heaven forbid; a conscript army of misfits; no discipline, no knowledge, no good! I was to return to Topographic (Topo) Troop, for the duration of the Exercise. I turned up in the morning, with my personal kit, knowing that the vehicle I was to travel in would be ready and all I would have to do was to put my kit in, get in, and I would be back as a member of the troop.

The morning was dreadful. You could not see the square from the barrack block a matter of twenty yards away, the fog was so thick. The vehicle was there and fully loaded, ready for me 'but' and it was a big BUT: I was to drive it. No one had told me this! This was a vehicle with four forward gears, the first two of which were crash gears and one needed to double de-clutch when using them, not something that I had on my Mini Countryman. I was only grateful of my illegal driving of this type of vehicle. Things got worse; it had a trailer attached. I had never driven any vehicle with a trailer before; although I had been the passenger and navigator when one was used more times than I care to count. So, I had the knowledge but no hands-on driving experience. Just as I thought that things could not get any worse, the troop Staff Sergeant told me that my passenger was to be the Exercise postie (Sapper who handles the mail) and I was to pick him up from Carnarvon Barracks just down the road. He said for me to make my own way to the exercise area, and if I were lucky, maybe, I could catch them up on the way. That was likely, I don't think. I was a new driver, not Stirling Moss. 'Thanks a bunch, fellows.' I had the short straw simply because I was not there to put my point forward when all this was decided.

I was supplied with all the maps I needed for the exercise including the route there and I knew how to get to the Barracks where the 'Postie' was. In this thick fog it was so different, but I managed to get there, albeit slowly. Then I had to find the Postie, which I eventually did after asking my way several times and making sure that I was not driving down a dead end, which would mean I would have to back out with this Land Rover and trailer. That would be a nightmare situation for me. When I eventually found him and had him in the passenger seat, I gave him the maps and pointed out our destination and expected him to map-read us there. Things couldn't get worse!? Oh yes, they could. He said that he could not map-read. I thought that this was a fundamental skill for any soldier. I was a map maker and to find a soldier and worse, a Sapper, who stated that he could not read a map was a bit of a shock. At least we knew where we stood; he was a piece of meat in the passenger seat who could not drive, or map-read. I found out he was not much of a conversationalist either. I just hoped that he was not blind, and I could use him as another pair of eyes in this pea soup we were in, but I was not going to hold my breath on that one.

I could hold a map in my mind, and I studied the route, to get to the exercise area. This was quite some distance away. I could stop partway and refresh my memory or study the next section. I used autobahns as much as possible because I could see the 'Ausfahrt' (exit) signs even in the bad weather. I made good progress, and gained in confidence as I went along. I had not told my passenger that this was my first legal drive in a Land Rover. It would not have helped my confidence to have my piece of meat shaking in the passenger seat! I made one mistake on my navigation and had to turn round. I turned down a small track that I had missed on the map instead of the road further up. I had to reverse the beast. I put the reversing bar in place and my passenger saw me back. It only took me a couple of goes and the Postie did well, for a non-driver; he proved that he was not blind anyway and directed me well enough. I warmed to him a little after that.

I ended up at the exercise area ahead of the rest of the Troop. The advance party directed me to my area and helped me to detach that onerous trailer; my companion went off to HQ. I picked a prime place for my bivy (tent) and was set up by the time the rest of the Troop arrived, and I helped them as I had been helped. Our HQ wanted to send a message to the Exercise Commander; radio

communication had not yet been established, so they asked our Troop Commander to send a courier with a written message. As I was already set up, I was lumbered and I set off on my own, not that that was any different to how I had felt for most of the day. At least I had not got that trailer behind me. I could still not go very fast as the fog had not lifted all day and it was dark now. I drove the few miles to the exercise HQ. They were set up in the relative comfort of buildings with chairs and desks and, no doubt, comfy feather beds, but that is just me being jealous, or am I?

I was shown into the office of a French Colonel, and I duly saluted and handed over the message. He spoke very good English and had me sit down whilst he read the message. When he had finished, he said that there would be no reply; he added that the weather was so bad that I should stay the night with them and return in the morning. It was more a suggestion than an order. So, in my mind I had a choice; a feather bed or bivvy, French or British. There was the added factor that we still had no radio contact, and my Troop Commander would be expecting me back. I stood up said, "Thank you, Sir" saluted, walked out of the building to my Land Rover. To me there was no choice. I drove back to my Troop, reported in, had a late but substantial meal and slept soundly in my army supplied, feather sleeping bag.

A couple of years later, I was to be part of a Topo task, still in Germany, when the Staff Sergeant (SSgt) in charge of the Motor Transport (MT) Section asked me if I could drive a 'Three tonner'. He and I got on well together, and outside rank, we were good friends. I said, "Yes, but not legally." Later he asked if he could see my driving licence after which he said, "Yes, you can drive a 'three tonner.' Would you be prepared take one out on the next field task Topo Troop has as I don't have the required number of Landrovers available?" I asked, "can I spend a lunch hour, when the area was empty, with a 'three tonner' to familiarise myself and make sure that I was happy with it?" he agreed, and I did so, spending the time driving around, backing it into tight spaces and generally familiarising myself with the vehicle, its controls and its size. I spent the next six weeks on a survey task driving the 'three tonner' that carried the Survey Observing Tower. I was using it as a Landrover and sometimes taking it down tracks that should only have a Landrover down them, but we managed. By the end of the task when we returned, I certainly could drive a 'three tonner' in most conditions.

The MT SSgt had returned from a driving tester's course, and he asked to see my driving licence again. He then said, "actually this does not allow you to drive a 'three tonner.'" My reply and tirade for the next few seconds were along the line of, but not restricted to; "thanks a bunch. I have just been driving illegally for the last six weeks. What would have happened if I had been caught or had an accident?" He just smiled and said, "It didn't happen, so stop worrying about it." A couple of days later, he broke his leg and was in plaster. He asked me to drive him to Wiesbaden to the stores depot to pick up some supplies as he could not drive himself with broken leg.

The vehicle that he indicated that we were to travel in was a 'three tonner'. I said, "But I thought that you said that I could not drive one of these?" He just grinned and said, "Shut up, get in and drive." This was in the days that one did not argue with an order; unlike today, when one should not obey an illegal order. I drove him to the depot, and we picked up various stores that could quite easily have fitted in and been transported by a Landrover. He had me backing up to the various sheds in some of the most awkward places when I could have driven straight through the shed at times, instead of backing up. I called him a few names as I did what he said. On the return to the MT yard at the end of the trip, I put the 'three tonner' away and went into the office where the SSgt was to hand in the vehicle documents. The SSgt handed me a certificate. When I read it, I was a bit shocked to see that it was a pass certificate for a Class Three Heavy Goods vehicle (HGV). When I asked "What was this?" he said, "payment for six weeks illegal driving". He had taken me to the depot and put me through all the twisting and turning backwards and forward round the depot to assure himself that I could pass the required test before he was willing to give me the HGV3 Licence that he thought I deserved

New Feature..... "Did you know...?"

We are introducing a new feature into the newsletters under the headline "Did you know....." it will inform readers of services, benefits and other useful information that may be of interest.

If any member has anything they would like to share under this feature please send them to:

Newsletter Editor/Compiler, **Tish Gauci**, at REA-MilSvy-newsletter@outlook.com or

Secretary, **Ian Thurgate** at REA-MilSvy-Sec@outlook.com

Did you know...? Service Records

Did you know that you can apply for copies of your Service Record, for free, through the UK Government website?

You'll need proof of your identity, such as a passport or driving licence - and proof of address. Find out more and/or apply via this link [Get a copy of military records of service - GOV.UK](#) or search using "Get a copy of military records of service". Warning: This may find other sites that will provide the records but at a cost. Ensure you use the Government site which is FREE!

You can also apply for the records of close family too, although there is a small charge for this!

Prostate Cancer – an Appeal from Mike Aspray

We recently heard from Mike Aspray who had some bad news.....

From late December until late January Mike had several heart block incidents of between two and three-and-a-half minutes. He had a loop recorder fitted which helped identify the problem, and he was fitted with a Heart Pacemaker. He reports he's recovered well, that it's working perfectly and he has been allowed to drive again.

Unfortunately, whilst he was in hospital he was also diagnosed with Advanced Prostate Cancer!

Mike has now had the results of tests and he says the "Results aren't great, we are talking about managing the Cancer NOT CURING IT!!" He had his first oncology appointment and now knows what his treatment pathway will be.

Mike has taken the brave step to let us know what has happened to him in order to spread the word that.....

"Men approaching middle age, even if you feel fine and don't have any symptoms get yourself checked and ask for a PSA blood test. Prostate Cancer is so easy to treat if it's detected early!"

We can only agree and emphasise the need for men to get checked. We are aware of a number of Branch Members who have been diagnosed with Prostate Cancer - some with good outcomes and, unfortunately, some without!!

We echo Mike's words. Do get checked... even if you think you are fine!!

As stated above, we were aware of several Branch members who have had the Prostate Cancer diagnosis and are at various points in their treatment and recovery, and since first announcing this we have heard from more!

This raises the possibility of creating a sort of Mutual Support Group of people who have experienced it or are experiencing it. Mike and another member are happy to support the idea, and so we are inviting any member who has had the diagnosis to get in touch with us for more information at REA-milsvy-sec@outlook.com

Please be assured of our complete and utter discretion

Finally, we thank Mike for making us all more aware of Prostate Cancer and the need for checks and wish him the very best as he battles this horrible disease!

Contributors

Our thanks go to Joe Roberts, Jack Crompton, John Adlington, Ron Birch's family, Mick Perry's family, Dan Mumford, and Ted May,

The Secretary and Newsletter Compiler are always very grateful for contributions and, especially so at this time, any associated with 13, 14 and 16 Sqn. We hope, equally, to recognise 19 Sqn upon its 200th anniversary in due course.

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