

## **Get Some In!**

### **National Service**

On 7 May 1963, 23819209 Private Fred Turner cooked his last breakfast at the home of the 13/18 Hussars. A few days earlier on 4 May 1963, Lieutenant Richard Vaughan, Royal Army Pay Corps had left his unit in Germany and travelled back to England to be officially discharged on 13 May. What was so special about these two soldiers? They were candidates for being thought to be the last serving National Servicemen. If you base the choice of who was the last then it was Lt Vaughan but Pte Turner had the dubious honour of having the last army number to be issued to a National Serviceman.

There was another reason for doubt about the claim. About 50 national servicemen remained in Germany until the end of May. These men had all been detained for disciplinary or medical reasons.

Anyone who suffered the indignities of national service (NS) will at best now be in their late 70s. No one who reached the age of eighteen after September 1960 was liable for national service. Before then, more than two million men went through national service between 1947 and 1963. Many were caught in conflicts in far-off places some had never heard of – such as Korea, Egypt, Malaya and Cyprus. There were benefits. Some learned a trade or learned to read and write and a few were even taught Russian in case the Cold War hotted up. The latter and the author were to serve at No. 1 Wireless Regt Royal Signals, amongst other places. It is surprising that in this unit where most members had a high 'trade rating' (in the case of Intelligence Corps ORs, Clerk SID, B1) the Education Corps were still teaching third-class certificate (twelve-year-old school standard) to both regulars and conscripts as well as second-class and occasionally first-class, the equivalent of O Level in the education centre. The brighter did very well, getting nearly a year being taught Russian to A level, with the best of the brightest being sent to university to complete in a year the equivalent of a three-year degree at the Joint Services School for Linguists (JSSL). As many as three in ten national servicemen were semi-illiterate and as many as ten in one hundred illiterate.

The British have had a long history of opposition to conscription, seemingly able to manage without it until half-way through the twentieth century. The army raised to fight the Boer War was wholly made up of regulars and it was half-way through the First World War before the stream of volunteers dried up. The introduction of conscription in 1916 was strongly, but ineffectually, opposed by the trades unions and much of the country. It was accepted again in 1939, less than six months before the war started, but only because it was so evidently near. Universal conscription (of males) in peacetime had never been seen in Britain, whose defence strategy had for many centuries been based on a large, strong navy and a small ready-to-go-anywhere army. The large standing armies kept by countries like France and Germany were thought by the British to be shameful: 'No really civilised nation kept a standing army'. There were impassioned arguments not just on political and strategic grounds, but on economic ones; the war had brought Britain to its knees, industry was shattered and worn out. There was a chronic shortage of housing and many doubted that the country should be deprived of any manpower. Defeat of Nazi Germany had not brought about the

hoped-for peace; it would be some months before the surrender of Japan. Britain still had clashes with the artisans in Italy trying to lay claim to the port of Trieste, and in Greece where they found themselves fighting the resistance movement that had grown up during the German occupation and who now wanted a socialist state instead of a return of the monarchy. Britain would be involved in this conflict until 1948. British troops had quickly reclaimed Malaya, Singapore and Hong Kong but the French and the Dutch did not immediately have the forces to do the same in their colonial territories and so Britain committed units on their behalf in Indo-China and Indonesia.<sup>1</sup>

The 1948 National Services Acts consolidated wartime legislation.

One anomaly was exploited both by disenchanted regulars who could not afford to buy themselves out, and national servicemen. The rules were such that, absurdly, a serviceman only had to apply for the papers necessary to stand for Parliament; once discharged, he could, if he chose, abandon any political ambitions without forfeiting an electoral deposit. The rules were tightened when hundreds of servicemen applied for nomination papers to contest several forthcoming by-elections. It was this loophole which enabled Lord Heseltine to leave the army.<sup>2</sup> He did his utmost to avoid being called up, but was eventually ordered to report for duty. He found it so dull that after nine months, he obtained leave to stand as a Tory candidate in the 1959 election, in a hopeless seat. When the campaign was over, he got his solicitor to persuade the War Office that he didn't need to return to barracks.

He could at least claim to have been in the army longer than the former Liberal leader Jeremy Thorpe, whose stint lasted two weeks. Richard Ingrams, editor of *Private Eye*, who duly completed his two years of national service, claims Thorpe found an unusual way to escape the army. He said: 'I was told by a very good friend that he wet his bed.' Another Member of Parliament and noted military historian and author of *The Donkeys* on which *Oh, what a Lovely War*, was based, Alan Clark also found ways round the system; his only personal experience of the military was in the army reserve at Eton and a single day as a member of the Household Cavalry.

Illiteracy was another problem. The army almost never accepted illiterates as regular soldiers. The army sometimes defined illiteracy as meaning a reading age of 7 or 5.<sup>3</sup> The War Office estimated that 1 or 2 per cent of conscripts were unable to read or write. In October 1952, the secretary of state for war told Parliament that 850 of the national servicemen admitted to the army in the year up to the end of June 1952 were illiterate. It has to be borne in mind that for many their education had been disrupted by the war. With time, this statistic was to improve.

Within a couple of weeks of registering, the eighteen-year-old would normally receive notice to attend a medical examination. If missed, without what was known as 'good cause' he could be given up to two year's imprisonment and a fine of £100. Some who were determined to evade national service saw that failing what was known as The Medical was possibly their best chance of doing so. Rumours abounded as to how to fiddle a way out. Claiming flat feet or defective eyesight were popularly believed to have the best chance. Stories abounded about the perils of the Medical and how to beat the system. There were numerous half-baked notions: swallowing soap to foam at the

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<sup>1</sup> B.S. Johnson ed. *All Bull: the National Serviceman*,

<sup>2</sup> Heseltine served nine months in the ranks as a guardsman. He became a Junior Under Officer whilst training at Mons. Alan Clark & Jeremy Thorpe were other well-known MP's who found ways around serving. There were undoubtedly others.

<sup>3</sup> TNA WO 32/10994

mouth; eating cordite (but where could you get cordite?) to induce sweating and increase the heart rate; nutmeg was said to produce the same symptoms.<sup>4</sup>

The first thing usually to greet you was a sign reading something like

**NO NOT PASS WATER YOU WILL BE REQUIRED TO PRODUCE A SAMPLE**

This often produced a problem. Some could not wait, usually due to nerves, and had to visit the toilet only to find when the sample was required that they were unable to perform. There were rumours of their next-door neighbours in the cubicles sometimes helping out, and of samples being submitted which had been supplied by girlfriends anxious not to lose their beloved ones.

There were four medical grades into which the potential recruit could fall. The last of these grades was for those unfit for national service. Something like 16 per cent of those examined found themselves exempted on medical grounds – perhaps a surprisingly high percentage. It was still quite difficult to fail. Originally passed as fit, candidates were found to be malnourished, not uncommon, plus some who were found to be suffering from TB. Bed-wetting was frequently claimed as a reason for failure, unlike in the case of Jeremy Thorpe, usually unsuccessfully. It was surprising how sleeping in a urine-soaked bed would lead to a cure.

Intelligence and mental stability were tested by written tests. Men graded from M2 were considered able to readily assimilate ordinary forms of instruction; up to M8, men who would require close supervision or be unfit for service. There were many complaints that these Ministry of Labour medical boards passed an excessive number of men as fit.<sup>5</sup> Occasionally, recruits with undiagnosed conditions died during their service. Around one per cent of men who passed the medical boards in 1952 proved unfit to serve within their first few weeks of service – some after a single day.

Homosexuality posed particular problems for defenders of national service. In 1954, Arthur Lewis, a Labour MP asked the minister of labour whether he would ‘permit a National Serviceman ... to claim exemption on conscientious grounds where the person signing on has grounds to believe ... he may be liable to corruption from the practice of homosexuality in the armed forces.’<sup>6</sup> This was almost certainly a deliberate attempt to annoy the ex-Guards officers who were plentiful on the Conservative seats in those days, but concern about homosexuality was widely felt among observers who were favourable to national service and close to the armed forces. A youth leader advised conscripts: ‘I want to put you on your guard about coming up against men who want to be on terms of close personal affection with a member of their own sex.’<sup>7</sup> Homosexuality in the armed forces during the national service era caused considerable – unwarranted – anxiety. In Britain there were worries stirred up by the defection to the Soviet Union of the homosexual spies, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, and the high profile of the trial of Lord Montagu and his two co-defendants, in which the principle witnesses were two regular airmen.

The one thing that all national servicemen had in common was ‘war’ since no one born after September 1939 was called up. This meant that every national serviceman had lived through the whole of the Second World War. War changed family life and dramatically changed relations

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Hickman. *The Call-up*.

<sup>5</sup> Hansard 28/02/1956 Marcus Lipton MP.

<sup>6</sup> Hansard 2 February 1954. Arthur Lewis MP.

<sup>7</sup> Basil Henriques, So you are being called up 1947-52

between the sexes. From early 1941, it became compulsory for women aged between 18 and 60 to register for war work. Conscription of women began in December. Unmarried 'mobile' women between the ages of 20 and 30 were called up and given a choice between joining the services or working in industry. Pregnant women, those who had a child under the age of 14 or women with heavy domestic responsibilities could not be made to do war work, but they could volunteer. 'Immobile' women, who had a husband at home or were married to a serviceman, were directed into local war work.

As well as men and women carrying out paid war work in Britain's factories, there were also thousands of part-time volunteer workers contributing to the war effort on top of their every day domestic responsibilities. Other vital war work was carried out on the land and on Britain's transport network.

At any gathering of national servicemen – sadly getting less and less - the two subjects likely to be discussed are 'heroic drinking bouts' and basic training. As far as the army was concerned, 'basic' started on a Thursday with usually a train journey, having received a rail warrant and instructions as to where to report. In the early days, most youths had not travelled much and it was not uncommon for some to be making their first rail journey. Disembarking, they would almost invariably be greeted by immaculate NCOs (as they were to discover later) who seemed to think it necessary to scream and shout every instruction; very different from the schools where about 10% had been, just prior to being called up.

Wes Magee told of his experiences joining an infantry regiment prior to being transferred to the Corps. His story brought back vivid memories: of his fellow recruits and NCOs several of whom were clearly unbalanced. After the eight weeks basic training and ready to go on leave he was told he was to report to the Intelligence Corps depot, then at Maresfield. When he queried the posting asking 'What for' he had the response 'Six months training course, old son, serves you right for being so clever. It was the IQ test that did it"! <sup>8</sup>

John Arden, the playwright who served in the Corps, tells a similar story, of meeting people the like of which he had never come across before. He had the advantage of having served in the school cadet force. When old boys returned to the school after a year or two they usually came in uniform usually that of an officer and so if all went well he had similar expectations. After initially joining the Royal Artillery at Oswestry, having completed basic training out of the blue, whilst cleaning various literary gems from the latrine walls with Peter **Burke** also to become a member of the Corps, they were delighted to hear the following from their drill sergeant. 'Yo' two – Burke, Arden, posted in t'morning. Intelligent Corpse Maresfield. Going to mek yo' into f\*\*\*\*\*g spies, they are.'

They were not made into 'spies' – the Intelligence Corps units overseas were at that time being run down and trained personnel were being drafted into ordinary clerical jobs in all sorts of offices which could easily be carried out by civilians. He ended up a lance corporal in an Edinburgh office.<sup>9</sup> Peter Burke was an extreme example of the bookish national servicemen – his father had been a bookseller and the son would eventually go on to become Professor of cultural history at Cambridge University. He kept a diary of his service as a Pay Clerk in Singapore

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<sup>8</sup> All Bull p. 26  
<sup>10</sup> All Bull p. 230

The national service years were ones of terrific inter-service rivalry at sport – all sport: football, rugby, hockey, boxing, golf, cricket, athletics, skiing. Units vied with each other when outstanding professionals or amateurs were about to be conscripted. Henry Cooper, British heavyweight champion later famed for knocking down Mohammed Ali, told of his boxing-mad commanding officer. With Henry, his twin brother Jim, and Joe Erskine in the team, the unit never lost a competition. Sir Bobby Charlton, a Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) storeman, based in Shrewsbury, got home to play for Manchester United regularly. ‘The Club probably pulled a few strings’ was how he summed it up. No. 12 Wireless Sqn at Langeleben used to find their matches attracting large crowds, including scouts from such teams as Wolfsburg. Their goalie was Gordon Banks later to play for England and in the World Cup.

How many died doing national service or died prematurely because of national service is something that no one can know. All sources seem to agree that the total number of all servicemen who died between 1 January 1948 and the end of December 1960 was 1952. Of these, nearly 400 were killed or died of wounds whilst on active service. Most died in the UK. Of the total, 1109 were the result of the Korean war. (Compare this with the 7,747 US soldiers still missing). Most men who died during national service did so for reasons that had nothing to do with enemy action. Almost unbelievably, one national serviceman died from a surfeit of cream cakes.<sup>10</sup> In West Germany, it was claimed by one unit that it was possible that their regiment lost more men in a NATO exercise in which soldiers were drowned and run over by tanks, than had been lost in a tour of duty on active service in Malaysia.<sup>11</sup>

Suicide has always been a problem for the armed services, not only in time of war and conscription as Deepcut illustrated so clearly. As Tom Hickman points out, ‘it is almost impossible to read the biography of anyone who did national service without finding at least a passing reference to suicide’. The fear in the minds of many men, coming apprehensively to basic training that they might not be up to it, and find themselves pushed over the edge was fuelled by stories which in the main appear to be apocryphal, often having taken place in the previous intake. The subject of suicide was such a part of national service basic training that it was widely half-believed that anyone witnessing an attempted suicide would be instantly demobbed.<sup>12</sup> It has been impossible to trace any record of anyone who died by their own hand. The army claimed that ‘the figures were comparable to those in the wider population’ but were unable to produce any actual figures to substantiate the claim. It is constantly alleged that some cases of suicide were covered up as ‘accidents’. It can be speculated that this is possible where firearms are involved. One would like to think that if this happened it was to save a family’s feelings, not as Jock Marr put it in true army style ‘to keep someone’s arse out of the fire’.\*

In response to a widely circulated request for volunteers to take part in tests to find a cure for the common cold in the 15 post-war years to 1960, 2,644 men – in the main conscripts – went to Porton Down for an additional payment of up to fifteen shillings (75 pence) and a few days leave. Rather than being treated for the common cold as they had agreed, they had to breathe in nerve gases or

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<sup>10</sup> IWM15316. P Houghton-Brown. National Service June 1955-1957. R.Vinen National Service p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> NAM 2006-12-77-83, Malcolm Edward Barker. The article alluded to nine people killed by shellfire, drowning and a [jeep Land Rover?](#) crash.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Hickman. The Call-up

had them dropped on their skin in liquid form, or both. The stories are absolutely appalling and too many to quote here. None of the authorities covered themselves with glory, doing everything possible to prevent the truth being known.

The men who went to Porton Down were lied to or at the very least, misled. The many thousands who, in the Fifties witnessed Britain's nuclear bomb test explosions in Australia and the south Pacific, were simply told nothing. Between 1952 and 1958 Britain conducted 21 nuclear tests in Australia and Christmas Island (now Kirimati) in the south Pacific. Around 22,000 servicemen, a high proportion of them conscripts were involved; 15,000 of them as observers. None of them knew that they were being exposed to radiation fallout. In February 1997 the European Commission of Human Rights concluded that Britain had acted illegally and dishonestly to men involved in the Tests yet the claim that went to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg was rejected and in January 2000 refused to re-open the case.

In 2001 the Ministry of Defence (MOD) said on 1 May that it would carry out a 'historical survey' of its service volunteer programme, which ran from 1939 to 1989 at Porton Down. Formerly the site of controversial research on chemical and biological weapons, the centre remains active, working on defences against such weapons.

The national service haircut was a constant subject for discussion even to the extent of being raised frequently in the House of Commons.<sup>13</sup> Barbers were civilians employed by the army who were able to set their own charges; usually ninepence to a shilling (a few pence). A visit to the barber's had to be made at least once a week. NCOs used the threat of an additional visit to the barber's as a punishment, and a useful outlet for their infantile senses of humour: 'Can you feel me treading on your hair?'

The army made NCOs out of some unpromising material. The authors of a War Office study were disconcerted to find that 8 per cent of national servicemen who had been referred to psychiatrists during basic training because of perceived defects in personality or intellect, subsequently became NCOs. The army found it curious that men graded 3 for emotional stability had been promoted more frequently than those graded 2, and that NCOs included those who had been deemed to 'lack even the normal aggressive vigour which would have been thought necessary for the control of men by an NCO, even in peacetime'. The authors of the report discounted the possibility that 'unstable men and negative weaklings are more likely to be chosen as NCOs'<sup>14</sup> – though their own survey suggested that the colourless stable group performed better than some ordinary soldiers, and that a simple ability to stay out of trouble was enough to get a man promotion in some fighting units.<sup>15</sup>

In the army, a large proportion of national service NCOs, sergeants especially, held their rank because they did some particular job that brought an automatic promotion rather than they had risen through the ranks. Half the total number of sergeants in the army in 1958 served in the Royal Army Education Corps (RAEC). Interestingly there is no statistic for the Intelligence Corps, but undoubtedly they formed a large proportion of the 584 unaccounted for. It was a constant source of irritation that those who passed the course and went on to field security (FS) units seemed to be

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<sup>13</sup> Mr Simmons MP asked the Secretary of State for War what proficiency regimental barbers were required to attain. In reply he quoted Queen's Regulations which stated only that 'hair was to be kept short', to ironic laughter..

<sup>14</sup> Any national serviceman would confirm that this was the case. There was universal condemnation of them.

<sup>15</sup> TNA WO 291/1408 AORG, 'FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF PSYCHIATRIC GRADINGS. Richard Vinen p. 238

made up to sergeant, whereas those who had followed the MI8 (now known as Sigint) route rarely achieved much more than corporal.

Like clerks and army teachers, men in the Intelligence Corps were often given non-commissioned rank and, independently of rank, the Corps had special prestige in the eyes of some national servicemen. Perhaps, just because those whose lives had revolved around the Eleven-plus, they were fascinated by the very word 'intelligence'. This was a time when *Dick Barton: Special Agent* was listened to every night by the bulk of the population. Seeking to find out why some men did not want commissions in the army, the War Office asked a sample of suitably educated men whether they would prefer a 'special job' as a sergeant in the Education Corps or a private in the Intelligence Corps to being an officer, a significant minority of candidates said that they would prefer a 'special job'.

The writer left school at the age of 16 and spent two years training and qualifying as a librarian before being called up to the RASC. He asked to be posted to the Intelligence Corps following on from a close neighbour, Brian Bolton, who had served with the Corps in Trieste and Austria. After repeated failures he suddenly found himself at Maresfield and after FS and MI8 training found himself posted to GCHQ Cheltenham, and then No. 1 Wireless Regt and No. 12 Wireless Sqn in Germany. Langeleben as it was called, had the unenviable reputation as being the worst army camp – deservedly. Initially it was housed in tents on the edge of the Harz mountains close (4 miles) to the actual East/West border in those days, marked only by a white band painted on a tree. Unlike as it was seen by some as a punishment posting, the writer spent 15 blissful months there believing that they were making an actual contribution to the security of the West.

The elite of those who would work in intelligence in all forces, were those who learned Russian. It was an exceedingly difficult course and required total dedication. Those who failed to learn fast enough faced the indignity of being returned to their original regiments, not the Intelligence Corps. There was a division between those considered good enough to go to university and become interpreters, and those who were merely allowed to become translators. Geoffrey Elliott and Shukman describe life there vividly.<sup>16</sup> Lambasted by the Soviets as a 'spy school' The JSSL was a major Cold War initiative, which pushed 5000 young national servicemen through intensive training as Russian translators and interpreters, primarily to meet the needs of Britain's signals intelligence operations. Over its nine-year life it operated from military camps in Surrey, Cornwall and Scotland, and special enclaves created at Cambridge and London Universities. It had parade grounds rather than sports fields and pupils included a remarkable cross-section of talented young men who came to JSSL as national servicemen and went on to a diversity of glittering careers: professors of Russian, Chinese, ancient philosophy, economics, history; authors such as Alan Bennett, Dennis Potter and Michael Frayn; screenwriter Jack Rosenthal; and churchmen ranging from a bishop to a displaced Carmelite friar.<sup>17</sup> officers had a totally separate course which inexplicably involved spending several months in Paris.<sup>18</sup>

The playwright Dennis Potter was first posted to the Royal Army Ordnance Corps on 17th May 1953. As he said 'He was so shocked by the army, his first and only thought was how he could survive.

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<sup>16</sup> G. Elliott & H. Shukman. *Secret Classrooms*

<sup>17</sup> Amazon

<sup>18</sup> NAMSA 2000-04-2

After two weeks, on 11 October, he was transferred to the Intelligence Corps. It was there that he met Kenith Trodd who would play an enormous part in Potter's life as his constant TV producer. Though they were now in the Intelligence Corps, Potter and Trodd found that life at Maresfield consisted of 'more square-bashing'. Trodd, in particular struggled with army life. Things improved when in early November 1953 they were transferred to the JSSL at Bodmin. Potter achieved 82% at A level Russian. Trodd explained 'They were running a superior Russian course at Cambridge and a small proportion at Bodmin were creamed off for that. Michael Frayn, a year earlier had gone on it; possibly because with their very working-class backgrounds, unlike Frayn, they were not considered officer material. Those who did succeed became second lieutenants. Alan Bennett was equally unsuccessful. There is a story that despite their having been the best of friends whilst studying, on being commissioned, Frayn insisted that Bennett salute him. It is said that this caused a rift. Potter and Trodd had quite a colourful national service career, being posted to the War Office during May 1953. Denis was in MI3(D) whilst Kenith was adjacent in MI3© next door. This period would play a vital role in some of Potter's greatest work. His death in 1994 deprived British television of one of the most controversial figures it has ever known. While his subversive plays such as *Pennies from Heaven* and *The Singing Detective* scandalised and delighted the nation, they also made him the butt of the tabloids, who nicknamed him 'Dirty Den' for his 1989 serial, *Blackeyes*.

National service found recruits serving in some unlikely places. John Quintin, later to be a successful banker, was called up in May before going up to Cambridge in 1948 and found himself having to serve an extra six months due to the Berlin airlift. Like many not wanting to be an officer, he joined the Corps and became a sergeant. He was sent to Trieste where he interrogated refugees from Croatia and Slovenia in his primitive Italian. Aged nineteen, he set up a smuggling ring that moved contraband and information across the Yugoslav frontier. One day, a member of the gang staggered into his office leaving a trail of blood. As he recalled some fifty years later, 'all except one of them were shot dead on the frontier because of a mistake by my commanding officer'.<sup>19</sup>

One of the biggest bones of contention during national service – particularly basic training - was the excessive cleaning of equipment known as 'bulling', with various materials all of which had to be bought out of the pittance twenty-eight shillings (£1.40p) 'deductions' that they were paid. Recruits were issued with two pairs of boots which were handed out with the rest of their kit on their first day. Boots and plimsolls, black came in full sizes only; a request for a half size to the storeman merely brought about a grin. Recruits spent hours with a hot spoon heated over a candle, removing the pimples on the leather, then circling a mixture of spit and Kiwi (not Cherry Blossom which contained wax) boot polish into the toecaps and heels until they shone like glass. Toecaps and heels were sufficient for everyday boots but 'best boots' had to shine with the same lustre on their side surfaces. Sadistic NCOs, not satisfied with the results, would frequently throw the boots across the room resulting in the work all having to be done again. It was claimed by troops who escaped the German invasion of Crete by marching through the mountains to the south that their boots fell to pieces on the rocky terrain, as a result of bulling with the hot spoon having destroyed the stitching.

Webbing which supported the various packs was a constant source of excuses for NCOs to show their power. All webbing apart from the brass fittings had to be coated in blanco – basically mud. There were various shades of khaki and green, white and for the armoured units, black. Every time

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<sup>19</sup> John Quintin interviewed by Paul Thompson. NLSC: City Lives 1988

one changed units, it seemed inevitable that a change of blanco colour was required. Despite having spent literally hours polishing brasses, rarely would the result gain the approval of the NCO. Brass buttons and cap badges (which had to be polished until they were smooth) were eventually replaced by Staybrite, releasing hours to be filled in other ways. As the use of cotton webbing declined and was replaced by nylon and other synthetic materials, the need for blanco, and its complementary products, Brasso and Duroglit in maintaining personal military equipment, disappeared.

There is still one aspect of national service that still haunts us today. A lot of men started to smoke during national service and the majority, who already did, smoked far more than they would otherwise have done. With free and subsidised cigarettes they got men to smoke like chimneys. But, as Albert Tyas philosophically put it 'you can't blame national service, it was society then'. Small consolation for those lucky 80-year-olds as they cough and splutter their way to the surgery for the COPD clinic! In Germany, selling a packet of 20 for DM1.20 on the black market, usually the local bar, helped to make life more comfortable. Almost enough for a good night out on that fizzy cold stuff the Germans called beer. Despite the German brewers having to maintain far higher standards for their beer, there was a strongly held belief amongst aquaddies that it was 'chemical muck'.

Many of the hundreds of camps to and from which national servicemen would hitch-hike (a forgotten art) are gone or abandoned. The Maresfield site in Sussex, now split by a bypass, is part-housing estate, part-leisure centre and part-fire brigade training centre. Who of those who served there will ever forget the Chequers and the landlady who knew everything that was going on? The Corps moved to Ashford and then its current home in Chicksands. Those who were with the JSSL in the early days will recall the Guards depot at Caterham – that has gone. Bodmin is an industrial estate and little is left of Crail. No more Blenheim and Buller Barracks, Aldershot or Reservoir Barracks, Gloucester where those destined for MI8 were trained and to which the Glosters returned after their appalling time in Korea and Korean prison of war camps; all were briefly homes to national servicemen.

No history of national service can omit the horror of the Korean War. More British troops, fighting under the United Nations, would die in this conflict than in Iraq, Kuwait, Afghanistan and Malaya combined. National servicemen expecting to be demobbed, instead found themselves in a godforsaken hole somewhere in the Far East. Some would spend three years in prison, others would die. National service was extended to two years, so affecting all national servicemen – even conscripts who never went near the Far East.

The British government of the time saw national service as an insurance policy in the event of future global conflict, and seemed not to have expected to stay much longer than the resolution of the turmoil and uncertainty left behind after WWII. The 'bear in the east' had still to show its teeth and claws. The Government envisaged national service as a kind of auxiliary that for a few years would flesh out the professional armed forces. It did not envisage anything like the Korean war hitting the fan, or that the armed services would be so stretched that, by the time fighting was over, nearly three-quarters of the men in the trenches would be conscripts.

It can be fairly said that national servicemen acquitted themselves as well as regulars, in some cases better. National servicemen who were promoted were too often found to be quicker-witted and more responsive than the regulars who had spent far too much time presiding over pay parades and kit inspections. Bluntly, they were more cautious, many of them thinking that they had done with

real soldiering but too scared of the real world to have considered leaving. D.F. Battett, one of the men eventually promoted to corporal, wrote in 1950 'the situation within the platoon is that our regular army mentors are literally fading away before our eyes'.<sup>20</sup>

A total of about 1,000 British servicemen were captured in Korea. Most of them belonged to the Royal Ulster Rifles who were captured in January 1951, and to the Glosters captured in April 1951. It seems that 100 British servicemen taken prisoner remain unaccounted for. One single defector returned to Britain in 1962. There are no complete figures for the proportion of national servicemen among prisoners, but by the end of September 1952 119 conscripts had been captured and six were known to have died in captivity.

National service was seen as vital to maintaining Britain's position internationally. It enabled the army to meet widespread and heavy commitments throughout the period in Germany, Palestine, Malaya, Korea, the Suez Canal Zone, Kenya and Cyprus, in addition to bearing the brunt of the basic defence of Britain. There is one school of thought that the preservation of such a large, totally unproductive army at that time together with the Marshall Plan, gave Germany the chance to create an economic lead still to be overcome – if ever. Between 1945 and 1963, Britain was to change from being the greatest power that the world had ever known to a small island ruling over a few other small islands. It acquired nuclear weapons which enabled her to cling to a place at the top table, but at what may prove to be an unacceptable price.

It is odd that National service left behind it what Tom Hickman described as 'a curious nostalgia amongst those who had served'. Originally hostile, public opinion after 1970 seemed to have swung back in favour of there being some sort of community service 'something short of military service'. Earl Attlee, son of the Labour prime minister who had doubts about the need for peacetime conscription right from the beginning of his premiership in 1945, surprisingly supported the idea. He veered towards an expansion of Voluntary Services Overseas 'because the youth of today has been raised on such a diet of television and screen violence they should be made to do something that shows respect for their fellow men'.<sup>21</sup> We have progressed no further in this discussion. One unexpected consequence was that it threw open to closer inspection all of the armed services, all of whom had been found wanting at the outbreak of war in a way totally alien to them. Hopefully, it put an end to them being 'ready to fight the last war', a claim frequently made of the British Army in the past.

'You read that distance lends enchantment; that with the passing of time men only remember the good bits about national service, and for some that may be true' commented Adrian Walker who was in Cyprus with the Intelligence Corps. He added 'But if it is possible in a single phrase to cover what the majority of national servicemen feel about their time in uniform it's - rueful affection'.

If one were needed, Tom Hickman probably gives as good an epitaph as any: 'Two million eighteen-to twenty-year-olds, give or take, served whatever way they were asked to fight the Russians for twenty eight shillings or whatever and they deserve recognition'.

It was a tremendous gift to the nation.

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<sup>20</sup> NAM 2000-08-55. D.F.Barrett, diary entry, 29 December 1950

<sup>21</sup> Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) is an international development charity with a vision of a World without poverty and a mission to bring people together to fight poverty - Wikipedia

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'The majority benefit from national service at least in physical fitness and character development', was the conclusion of a report issued by the King George Jubilee Trust in 1955. This was a time when the writer served and is unable to recognise the claim