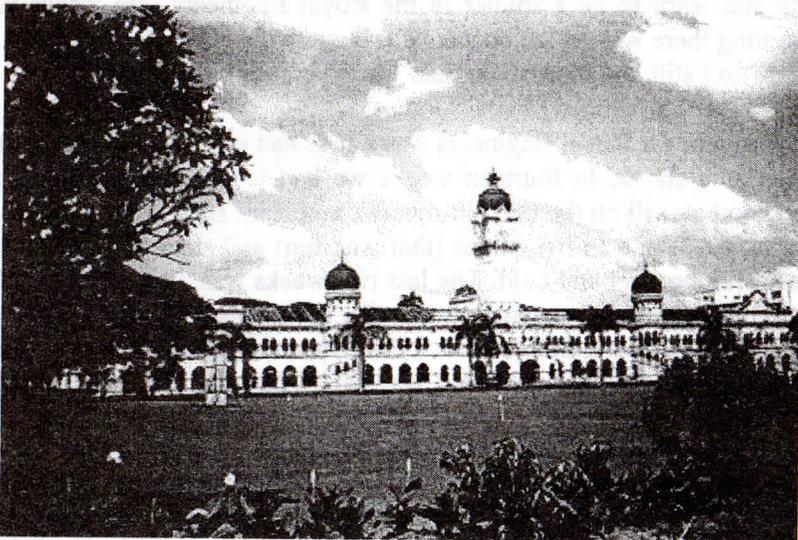


Barnet & District Local History Society

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ENTERING THE FIFTIES.



I left school in July 1948 at the age of 16 years and 2 months but didn't start work straightaway - I reckoned I was entitled to the school holiday before starting a lifetime of work. So I started work in September at a firm of estate agents and surveyors in Holloway. Working hours were 9 o'clock until 6, with an hour for lunch, plus Saturday morning from 9 until 1. Once I had started there it became clear that I couldn't get to my evening classes to study building surveying in time, so three times a week I was graciously permitted to leave at 5.45; the classes started at 6.30 and ran until 9.30 so the day was fairly long by the time I got home to East Finchley from the Regent Street Polytechnic.

I completed the first year classes and started on the second, and put in my application to take the First Examination of the Royal Institution of

Chartered Surveyors. Some time later I got a letter from them saying that the Holloway firm was not recognised by them, and I couldn't take the exam.

Six weeks later I was in the army.

National Service was due at the age of 18 and was for eighteen months, but anyone studying for a degree or professional exam could have it deferred until they finished with a limit of age 26, so I had expected to be deferred but I wasn't because I was not actually taking an exam. So I had to stop studying and learn to be a soldier in the Royal Engineers. Six weeks into basic training there was an announcement: National Service was increased to two years. So I still had more to do than when I started!

Basic training in the Royal Engineers was not as bad as in the infantry, but it still came as a shock. In fourteen weeks we had to become good square-bashers (good at drill on the barrack square), and learn such esoteric skills as blowing up roads and railway lines (that was fun) and steering rafts on the lake - also fun but wet and cold. The last two weeks was a return to square-bashing, culminating in a passing-out parade, but I missed this as I was sent off to Chatham to take a trade test as a draughtsman (architectural). Before the results of the test were through I was called into the office.. "You're a draughtsman, aren't you .. Done any cartographic work?" I hadn't, but I still got sent to the Chief Engineer's Drawing Office at Shorncliffe near Newhaven to prepare the maps for an exercise they were planning. This was supposed to take two weeks, but it stretched into two months, at the end of which there were demands that I return to Chatham for posting. I enjoyed Shorncliffe, especially as I got home for nearly every week-end.

Back at Chatham I was instantly posted to Maidstone to a new unit, 50 Squadron of 25 Field Engineer Regiment. I was almost the first arrival, so I became the Squadron Draughtsman as I could type. In the next few weeks five other draughtsmen were posted in, but as there was only one draughtsman post they found themselves digging holes for telegraph poles.

Once the Squadron was complete it was moved to Norfolk to build camps for Z-reservists who were likely to be called up to augment the army. We worked solidly for weeks and weeks, although in the office this wasn't too bad except for regular night duties as Duty Clerk which had to be instituted

after the powers that be couldn't notify us one evening that our training ranges were to be shelled the next morning.

We occasionally got a Saturday night out in Norwich, transported in the back of an army lorry. One Saturday I went to the gunsmiths in Norwich and bought a shotgun (and a 7/6d licence at the Post Office) and carried it around the town. Nobody took any notice, unlike today when all hell would be let loose. The gun was to shoot rabbits on the training range. I wasn't very good, but sometimes I would wake up in the morning to find the gun cleaned, a few cartridges missing, and a pair of rabbits under my bed, which I would wrap up and post home. Rationing was of course still in full swing.

By now I was nearly half-way through my service, and we were sent off for two weeks leave as a reward for all our hard work. I was told that there was a 'draft warning order' for me and I shouldn't be surprised if I were called back early. There was little chance of that as I went off on a bicycle tour of England, after a few days at home when I took the opportunity to visit the Festival of Britain. One of the high points of the Festival was the big aerial on the Shot Tower which was used to bounce radar signals off the moon - a feat which is commonplace today as radio amateurs communicate by moon bounce.

When I got back we cleared up the camp and returned to Maidstone where messages kept coming that I was not at Chatham yet. I finally went to Chatham on a Friday and on the following Tuesday set off for faraway places - we didn't find out where until we got there and were told to disembark.

We sailed from Southampton on a troopship, the Empire Trooper I think. It was built about 1917 in Germany, and how it became a troopship I don't know. It wasn't very comfortable and the only way to avoid parades was to volunteer for the Concert Party. Good job I play the piano! On one memorable occasion in the Mediterranean we were given Lee-Enfield rifles and practised shooting at a towed log with tracer bullets. We had to stop if any other ship came within miles of us - probably a sensible rule rather than a comment on our marksmanship.

We sailed through the Bay of Biscay, past Gibraltar, through the Mediterranean Sea to Alexandria where we had two hours to see the town,

and then through the Suez Canal to Aden where we had another couple of hours shore leave. On again to Colombo on the south side of what was then Ceylon (two hours) and then to Singapore where I got off after a cruise of 28 days, although the boat went on to Hong Kong and Korea (not a nice place at that time.)

I was posted to DCRE (the office of the Deputy Chief Royal Engineer) at Singapore City which was responsible for the building maintenance of the military buildings in Singapore. It was a jolly good posting, but only lasted two weeks; I was sent up-country to Kluang in Malaya (about a hundred miles north) to the Engineer Training Centre (ETC) which had 22 British instructors teaching 18 various building trades to about a thousand 'locally enlisted personnel' - which included several hundred Gurkhas, Malays, and Chinese. On arrival I was asked 'You're a draughtsman - mechanical?' 'No, architectural.' 'Oh well, you'll have to do although we really wanted a mechanical drawing instructor.'

They did have parades at ETC for the instructors, but only on Friday mornings. On my first one I was pulled up: 'Where's your medal, laddy?' I knew nothing of this but was quickly told that Malaya was active service (in fact we did get shot at occasionally, though the infantry patrols did infinitely worse) and twenty-four hours after arriving in Malaya the General Service Medal with clasp 'Malaya' was automatically conferred, and why wasn't I wearing the ribbon?

One of the drawbacks to being an NCO at ETC was that the guard duties were carried out by the trainees but the guard commander was a British NCO, so a duty came round about once a week. Only on one day a year did the religious and national festivals of the various groups of trainees coincide, and on that day the whole guard was British. So it wasn't worth being an NCO, especially as the trainees obeyed orders from instructors whether NCOs or not.

I was given a room called a drawing office which contained three tea-chests and dozens of bottles of Indian ink, and three trainees - two Gurkhas and a Malay. They thought they spoke English. I was given six months to train them as draughtsmen, and the first thing we did was to pin paper on the tea-chests and design drawing desks, which the workshops then made with their trainee carpenters. To cut a long story a little shorter, they all passed their

test (the same as I took at Chatham) and I was spare. The radio instructor in the next room was demobbed at this time, so I went to Johore Bahru for a quick course which they made up as they went along and I became the new instructor. But not for long; they didn't need me for this so I became the storeman in the workshops, which meant I had the run of the place. I made a new towing bar for a road machine out of a giant piece of steel and I learned how to do arc welding and gas welding, and used an enormous lathe to make a brass ring to fit my camera.

I was also responsible for keeping the Ordnance maps of the surrounding country and it seemed very strange to have a 1" Ordnance Survey map with areas marked 'unexplored' and dotted lines marked 'probable course of river.' Some years later I surprised a colleague by explaining to him that the map reference he had for a military operation in Malaya didn't refer to the place he expected, because the country had been mapped using three different grids and he had the wrong one. Some pages of hairy maths later we found the right place.

Working hours were quite good. We worked from eight in the morning until two, with a break about 11 o'clock. Then lunch, and the rest of the day was our own. Sleep, read, swim (we talked them into letting us use the officers' swimming pool) then in the evening go to the pictures (the garrison cinema was in our bit of the camp so it was close by, and you could see your way home by the repeated lightning flashes. No thunder though - strange) or go to the NAAFI. The NAAFI used to make a rebate to unit funds and this was partly spent on the instructors' mess; we had Chinese civilian cooks and excellent food. Or you could stay in and play cards and smoke (the nice tobacco people gave us a tin of 50 cigarettes and a box of matches each a week) or write letters. I wrote letters for several people, and had to read them the replies. It surprised me that there were people of 19 who couldn't read although they were quite capable of cleaning me out at poker. (Incidentally, during training we had had to have 'education' and I was in a group which was above average. We were given a maths question to answer and twenty minutes to do it, and after two or three minutes conversation broke out. When the time was up the instructor showed us the solution which covered the blackboard three times over, and asked for any questions. One man at the back asked if he could come out and show his working; he did so, and got it out in three lines by calculus. The instructor asked if

anyone else had done it that way, and a forest of hands was his answer. We were told we weren't supposed to know this, and had no more 'education'.)

While I was at Kluang I got away for two little outings (apart from forays into the town for the odd Chinese meal). I went off on the train to Kuala Lumpur, ostensibly to watch a cricket match but really out of curiosity, and I remember the amazing building that was the General Post Office. I should have a photo of this somewhere. The other outing was on Boxing Day when we went off in an army lorry to the seaside at Mersing, twenty or thirty miles to the east. We went swimming in the sea until we noticed lots of what we thought were sea-snakes and made a hasty retreat, We spent the rest of the time drinking bottles of beer we had brought with us in a dustbin with some ice.

In February 1952 the King died, and so the whole unit had a special parade. The locally enlisted recruits all turned out and the instructors formed their usual Friday squad. We stood and watched while a squad from the infantry regiment down the road went through the special drill appropriate to the occasion, including drilling with rifles upside-down - the military equivalent of a requiem service.

I never did manage to learn Malay; I learned that 'orang utan' meant 'man of the jungle', and 'berenti' meant 'stop', and plurals were formed by repeating the noun, so 'orang-orang' was 'men'. Counting was difficult because it went 'one, two, lots' - and that was it. Or perhaps they were having me on.

One day, I thought it was about time I went home. I went to the office to ask and they said 'Oh yes, you go Saturday morning' - this was Thursday. On the Friday I was invited to some local festival provided they could see the new moon, so that night we had a jolly good party, and I failed to wake up in the morning in time for the train. I went to the station anyway, and the train hadn't arrived - it was running an hour and a half late on its run from Kuala Lumpur. So I got to Singapore; nobody wanted to know as it was Saturday so I moved into my old barrack block and found out that the sky had been cloudy the previous night. So another party!

We sailed on Tuesday (always seems to be a Tuesday when things change) and came back by the same route. We stopped at Gibraltar though there was

no shore leave, and I bought a bottle of brandy from one of the itinerant boat merchants. Brandy from a tin mug at 6.30 in the morning is something else again!

On our way through the Bay of Biscay, in thick fog, we stopped beside another boat to transfer their Captain's daughter to our boat as she had appendicitis, and then we stopped again just outside Falmouth to put her off. The harbourmaster came out in his launch with his family all dressed for the hot summer's day (July) but we were cold - a year in temperatures of 90 all day and 85 all night leaves an impression.

Then on to Liverpool, of all places, having spent 29 days travelling. On the train going through the suburbs some of my companions saw their homes - but we had to go down into Hampshire, to Barton Stacey. We arrived late at night and no-one expected us, so the next morning we went down to the office to complain of no food, no lights, no bedding.. and were told 'Sorry - have a week's leave.' So off we went - some back to Liverpool barely 24 hours after leaving it.

When we got back to Barton Stacey, we found pandemonium. In a few days time there was to be an inspection by the GOC, and everything had to be shipshape (to coin a phrase). Whitewash by the gallon was applied, everything was polished and we were given drill parades. Alas, we had forgotten how to look like soldiers, so they took away our rifles and when the parade came we were put in a little squad away in a corner. The GOC made a bee-line for us - perhaps he too had had enough of new recruits and spit and polish.

Then, at last, it was the last Wednesday, and tomorrow we leave full-time service. A party was arranged, and about half-past three an NCO came to see us and asked what we were doing. 'Tomorrow we are demobbed and tonight we celebrate' 'Yes, tomorrow you're demobbed but not here; tonight you get the train to Ripon in Yorkshire.' So, no party; we travelled to London and then to Leeds where we changed trains at half-past four in the morning, and on to Ripon at half-past eight. A few phone calls later we were picked up, and the formalities were concluded by a quarter past nine; back on the train and at last home for good.

This wasn't quite the end of my National Service; there remained 3½ years of reserve service which entailed a week each year at camp; one of them I attended with my arm in a sling which meant I was fit only to direct traffic.

After that I finally received my Discharge Certificate which made no mention of the medal which had caused me some bother; they had forgotten to notify it in the London Gazette. This was put right and a while later I got my medal - with the right sovereign on it, even though he had been dead for four years. And engraved on the edge was my name, 22403028 Spr P W Willcocks, RE.

My full-time military career was over, and I was still not qualified. I had been given the opportunity to do a correspondence course while I was abroad, but it wasn't really possible to settle to it. So I went to work for my father, who was recognised, and returned to evening classes. Not to Regent Street - that was London County Council, and I was now living and working in Middlesex - but to Willesden Technical College. I found it very hard going as I was so out of practice at studying but I finally took the First exam in 1953, three years after I had been ready for it.

Two years later I took and failed the Intermediate exam, and my father suggested that I should change job to a larger office. I went off for my summer week's training and came back to find he'd got me a post with the London County Council as a Junior Technical Trainee. Now employed in London, and enrolled on their training scheme, I went on day-release (and evenings) to Brixton School of Building. All was not plane sailing, but after several attempts I passed the Intermediate exam and started on the final. I also married Doreen.

Unfortunately Brixton School of Building did not cover the final of the kind of surveying I was studying, so I had to change to the Northern Polytechnic in Holloway Road. Several shots at the final were finally crowned with success and I had finished with exams. It was now 1960.

So passed the fifties for me!