

## Joining Up

In March 1924 I went to the Royal Navy and Royal Marines recruiting office in Deansgate, Manchester, and offered myself as a recruit for the Royal Marines.

After a very stiff medical examination two of us out of half a dozen or so hopefuls who had presented themselves were accepted. At that time the supply of would-be recruits exceeded the demand so really the recruiting officers could afford to be very selective and we considered ourselves fortunate.

My companion was an ex-driver of a Foden steam wagon who had just scraped into the corps by being a few weeks under the upper age limit of 28 and had a rather unusual name of Cumberbatch. I had just scraped in by being a few weeks over the lower age limit of 17.

Sometime in the early evening of March 10 the two of us arrived at Deal where a sergeant met us at the station to take us to the Depot. He took us first to the South barracks canteen for a meal and after that over to North barracks to the reception room. This was then H9 a room at the top of H block. We were the first two members of a new squad so the 20 or so beds in the room were not occupied except for one bed in the

corner and we wondered whose it could be.

At about 10 o'clock we found out when a three badge old soldier came in obviously from the wet canteen and told us he was the trained soldier in charge of the reception room. Here was lesson number one in corps tradition that the old soldier always had the corner bed.

Almost the first thing he asked asked was what we intended doing with our civilian clothes when we received our uniforms and I readily fell in with his suggestion that he should buy mine for a few shillings. Of course on my first day of service I had never heard of conduct to the prejudice of good order and Naval discipline but there is no doubt the old soldier was guilty of it. He never seemed to lack beer money so it would appear that his secondhand clothes business was profitable.

H9 barrack room was exactly the same as the scores of other rooms at the Depot -- big, bare and dismal. In each were about 20 beds ranged around the four walls, the beds iron-framed with steel slats and sheet steel backs. When made up for daily inspection the front half was rolled away under the back half and made a fairly comfortable seat.

Each bed had a donkey's breakfast -- a straw-filled mattress and a straw-filled pillow. When made up for inspection, the palliases had to be folded into three, with the pillow in the fold, and the whole lot strapped up to the back of the bed. Three white blankets, one brown rug and a pair of sheets completed the bedding. For inspection these were arranged on top of the folded palliases so that each blanket and each sheet showed three falls to the front, with the sheets in the middle. The finished job looked rather like a section cut from a flat and Swiss roll.

Behind each bed was a shelf of steel slaps, under the shelf three iron pegs, and under the pegs a rifle rack. The floor was bare wood, scrubbed daily, with straight black lines of pitch seams running the length of the room, excellent marks on which to line up the front legs of the beds and the toecaps of the boots and canvas slippers under the beds.

The room furnishings were a trestle table, scrubbed wood, two trestle stools, scrubbed wood, and a huge cast-iron coal bunce, which must have weighed two hundredweight. Cast into the side of this particular item was the emblem VR 1851. In the summer months, when the bunces were out of use, they were stood up on end, the outside polished with Zebra grate black polish and the insides whitewashed.

Each recruit stayed in the reception room for three or four days until he had been issued with his kit and each day would see two or three new arrivals. Presently there arrived a youngster from Hull who could knock out a pretty good tune on the canteen piano. A year later when the squad had moved up to Eastney he transferred to the Royal Marines band. He became K A McLean, director of music, Royal Marines.,

On our second day we were taken to the paymaster's office in South barracks and given a 10 shilling (50p) advance of pay. This we thought a very handsome gesture but the next call was to the NAAFI and with the money we had to buy three cakes of Blanco (one white, one green one brown), a tin of cherry blossom shoe polish and a tin of old-fashioned boot blacking, bluebell metal polish, a button stick, a walking-out cane (swagger stick) and a ditty bag.

The blacking was the official way of getting a polish on greasy boots, but the unofficial way, was to sprinkle the boots with the Bluebell and then set light to them. A ditty box was an optional purchase which most of us fancied and we spent hours carving "Per Mare Per Terram" on the lid and filling the carving with red ceiling wax. Later on we found a much more

exciting and illegal way to decorate the boxes. It meant stealing a round of 303, removing the bullet and shaking the cordite out of the brass cylinder. Cordite was made in sticks, or cords, hence the name, of about needle thickness. The cordite was laid on a previously pencilled design on the lid, the end of the stick touched with a light and a fierce flame quickly ran around the cordite leaving the design neatly scorched into the wood. Fortunately none of us was ever caught at this very dubious practice.

Our next visit was to the quartermaster's store in East barracks, to be kitted up. Among the items listed under equipment was the complete set of webbing to make up a marching order, and we now knew why we had bought green Blanco. Next an issue of white buff equipment -- belts, frog, two pouches, and a rifle sling --- and we knew the reason at once for the white Blanco, and finally a pair of long naval tight leggings.

For some reason these had to be Blancoed brown, so with those three colours we were good customers of Joseph Pickering the Blanco manufacturers.

Unfortunately the leggings, a comfortable and practical item, were withdrawn after about six months and the uncomfortable puttee issued.

We wore khaki service dress only for musketry and

field training so the puttees were in use for quite short periods and very few of us mastered the art of winding a neat puttee around our legs.

At about this time the peakless Broderick hat was being replaced with a new style hat with a peak. We preferred the Broderick. It was much more comfortable. Happily the dark grey overcoat was still being issued and, worn over the blue uniform, looked very smart, much more so than the ugly khaki coats which came into use a few years later.

The hats as issued were fitted with a bamboo cane grommet to stiffen the brim. These made the hats look clumsy so to smarten them up we would change the cane for a wire grommet, only to be told to change back again because if we got near to a ship's compass the magnetic effects of the wire would cause a change in compass deviation. In fact in nearly 10 years aboard HMS ships I never once stood on or near that holy of holies, the compass platform. Our official issue of clothing included three very thick very rough flannel shirts, three coarse linen blue and grey striped shirts, three pairs of long wool drawers -- known then, as now, as dung hampers -- and three pairs of army grey socks. The flannel shirt had always to be worn under the linen shirt as bayonet fighting drills were always done in shirt sleeves, and PT with tunic and shirts

removed showing only the flannel shirt. As both these drills were done daily and we had to be properly dressed for each we had to wear both shirts.

Dressed in our grey overcoats, peakless hats and long leggings we somewhat resembled the 1914 - 1918 German infantry man.

Towards the end of the first week about a dozen of us were assembled. All had been kitted up, well-dressed in uniform, and were considered presentable enough to be taken to the office of the colonel commandant for swearing-in. Before seeing the commandant we were each told what to say in reply to the question "Why did you decide to join the royal marines? " Some were told to say, "To improve my prospects, " others to say, "To travel the world" and so on. In my own case the truth would have been, "Because I was hard up, sir," but I had to say the set pieces given to me even though I had been very hard up on an apprentice wage of just under a pound a week. The rate of pay on enlistment was then three shillings (15p) per day so £1.5p a week with no commitments was wealth! At that time the colonel commandant was LST Halliday VC who had earned his decoration at the Peking legation in 1900 and in later years I spent a four day leave in the legation and was able to visit the exact spot where this action took place.

Colonel commandant as a title has now been dropped but in 1924 each of the three headquarter divisions and the depot knew their commanding officers by that title. How we sweated on parade with that lot under our blue serge tunics.

Fortunately there were no drill movements which required us to remove our trousers so we did buy short thin underpants to wear in place of the official dung hampers. The old-style cutthroat razor was still standard issue and had to be laid out at kit inspection even though everybody used the safety razor.

Other clothing included three blue serge tunics, one pair of red striped trousers, worn for guard duties, and two pairs of plain serge trousers for everyday drills. Fatigue dress was a blue boiler suit. Altogether the kit filled a large brown canvas kitbag and a small white one which was known as a sea service kit bag. Why, I don't know, because we took both to sea with us.

At that time each division -- Chatham, Plymouth and Portsmouth -- and the depot had its own tailor's shops each employing about a dozen full-time tailors making all the uniforms required. The old stocks of Royal Marine Artillery buttons were being used up and some of the tunics issued to us had these buttons.

Anyone who got one of those considered himself one up on those who hadn't.

Every item of kit was of top quality, and more than 60 years later (1994) I still have in daily use my 1924 issue of two boot brushes, clothes brush and hairbrush.

We had now been at the Depot about a week. There were a dozen or more of us so we started a little preliminary squad drill not on the parade ground but in the North barracks drill shed, out of sight, and here for the first time we met the adjutant Captain Webber. Over the next nine months we came to like and to respect and admire him -- an officer and a gentleman in every respect. The parade Sergeant Major Chant was somewhat rotund so inevitably was "Tubby Chant" a kindly and avuncular sort who tried to hide his real self by being fiercely militaristic on parade. At any one time there were 10 squads under training with a sergeant MTI in charge of each -- all of them very strict and very fair. I never once knew our squad instructor to descend to sarcasm and he seldom swore -- he seemed typical of the parade ground staff. There was one odd sort of rank on the staff, perhaps there still is, a QMS , instructor of infantry drill. . It was not a convenient title for everyday use so we had to address him as "first drill ."

By early April the 93rd squad had formed and we began five solid months of square bashing. Three-rank drill was not then in vogue. We fell-in into ranks and formed fours to march off. So for 20 weeks we did turns on wheels, left and right forms, rifle drill by numbers, rifle drill judging your own time, riots drill, ceremonial drill, stick drills -- in fact the whole drill book. Stick drill had a slightly comic flavour. It was drilled with our little swagger cane, marching around the parade ground with the cane held between forefinger and thumb parallel with the ground. Then would come the order, "As an orderly with a message, halt ". At this we halted, placed the cane under the left arm, saluted, and 30 voices would sing out in unison, "Message for you, Sah!" Another salute, cane back to right hand, and march off.

A glance at the swagger cane showed which HQ division the recruit would eventually go to. The Chatham men had one silver ring, the Plymouth men had two and the Portsmouth men had three. We had been allowed to choose our HQ division when sworn in. Our kitbags had the same ring marks in black paint. After eight weeks we were considered to be sufficiently trained to do barrack guard so about every 10th day the squad provided the nine men required for

the two posts, one on the North barracks guard room, one on South barracks pay office. Guard duties were detested by all of us: The parade in full marching order at 09:00 hours, the boring two-hour spells on sentry go and the discomfort of sleeping fully dressed and equipped with boots on. We loathed it all.

Actually the two posts required eight men; the ninth was guard orderly. The best turned out man was selected when the guard paraded and was appointed orderly. There was keen competition for this as there were very solid advantages attached to the job. On arrival at the guard room, the orderly disposed of all his equipment except belt and bayonet. He did not do any sentry duties so had an almost uninterrupted night's sleep. The officer of the day did his visiting round at about 02:00 hours. He always tried to wheedle the sentry's rifle away from him but even we recruits knew better than to fall for that one.

Whilst the unlucky nine did their guard the remainder of the squad did barrack fatigues. The most popular of these was the ginger pop factory fatigue. The depot made its own ginger pop with the factory in North barracks under the supervision of a marine pensioner. He would tell us that we could drink as much as we liked while working on the premises but none must be taken away but fatigue dress being a loosefitting

boiler suit, it was easy to secrete as many as half a dozen bottles in the clothing. The man who had done a day in the pop factory and did not provide his roommates with a free booze up was considered a slow sort of chap. The bottles were the old-fashioned type with glass marble stoppers. Sometimes the empties were surreptitiously returned to the canteen, sometimes put under other rubbish in the dustbins. There must be several hundreds of them buried in the council refuse tip at Deal. Lately I have seen similar bottles in the antique shops priced at £2 each.

The least popular fatigue was coaling the barrack rooms, the galleys, the canteens etc which were all coal-burning. The fuel was delivered in a six man power hand cart and at the coal yard we shovelled coal into bunces, circular galvanised tubs holding about a half-hundredweight each and then loading up the handcart with about a dozen bunces and pushing the cart to wherever the coal was needed.

The barrack rooms were easily the most difficult to coal, often involving a climb up two flights of stairs -- hard and dirty work. In addition to this day of guard and fatigues, about every 10th day we would do a before-breakfast fatigue.

For this we paraded at 06:15 hours in fatigue dress to be detailed for such jobs as canteen, or commandant's

office, orderly room etc. There, under the supervision of an old soldier, we would wipe over the corticene floor. The golden rule seemed to be that if it was wet, it must be clean, so a BB seldom lasted more than 15 minutes except for those detailed for galley fatigue where he cooks were entitled to keep their BB men until 0700 hours and often did so, washing up huge stacks of greasy tins. There was one small perk attached to a galley fatigue – an early morning basin of tea with unlimited sugar. We indulged in none of your fancy drawing-room tricks of drinking from cups – basins were the standard issue.

At about the third month we did a swimming test. To pass we were required to swim two lengths of the bath and then remain afloat for three minutes while fully-dressed. For this purpose about a dozen old seamen's suits were kept at the swimming bath. We had the experience of the more senior squads to guide us and knew that the thing to do was to pretend to be unable to swim as each afternoon when the instructor would order "non-swimmers fall out" and they would march off for swimming instruction whilst the remainder of the squad sweated it out on parade. Remember, it was high summer. Naturally the PTI swimming instructors knew this Dodge as well as we did and after a few lessons could easily pick out the artful dodgers from the genuine nonswimmers.

Then the artful ones would be ordered to jump into the deep end. When in deep water it is difficult to put on a show of pretending to be a non-swimmer so we were soon sorted out but no matter, we had got in a few extra trips to the pool.

On passing the test we were given a swimming certificate which stated that "this certifies that so-and-so is able to swim." We all thought it a great joke to insert after the word "swim " the words "the channel " and as nobody in authority ever asked to see the certificate once it was issued, we had our joke and suffered no consequences.

We were of course subject to all the awesome provisions of KR & AI but generally our misdemeanours were small and the punishments correspondingly light. Twenty weeks of square bashing was very boring so a frequent offence was inattention on parade, the usual award for which would be one hour's extra drilling from 17:00 hours to 18:00 hours. A slightly more serious offence would merit one hours pack drill. Much depended on the NCO who was in charge of the punishment – the lenient ones would permit the offender to just march up-and-down the parade, with rifle comfortably at the trail or shoulder, but the martinet would insist on the slope for most of the hour and with the bayonet fixed

that would really cramp the arm muscles.

Thus an offence on parade was met with punishment on parade, but an offence within the company would be punished with extra work: for example dusty boots under the bed at morning barrack room inspection would merit one hour's extra work. The miscreant who earned himself "confined to barracks " had a long and busy day. He had to report to the guard room every time the bugle sounded "defaulters" and this was every hour during the evening and Saturday afternoons and Sundays and every day except Sunday did one hour's pack drill 17:00 hours to 18:00 hours. The CB man who lived in South barracks was worst off. He had a fairly lengthy walk to the guard room in North barracks to answer to his name.

Although the main parade on the barrack square was not until 09:00 hours, there was each morning at 08:15 hours a company parade. Each company fell in outside its own company block and every day we paraded in one of the various combinations that could be made up from our webbing equipment – one morning in marching order, the next in battle order, or skirmishing order, or ceremonial order – this last one wearing our white buff equipment. Then at 08:45 hours there was a quick scuffle back to the barrack room to get into "drill order " for the 9 o'clock parade. For a marching order the contents of the pack were: