

# Military Service



National Servicemen search loads carried on a donkey at a road block during the EOKA Emergency in Cyprus during the late 1950s. The relics of the British Empire were the most exotic, and dangerous, destinations for young men called up after the war.

I remember my first home leave, lighting up in front of my father at the end of my first meal at home, until then something I'd not dared to do. But in uniform, I felt my moment had come. My father, observing the somewhat theatrical body movements I adopted to demonstrate my easy familiarity with inhaling, asked: 'And what else did they teach you in the air-force?'

In the 15 years after the war 2.5 million young men aged 17 to 21 were called up for National Service in the armed forces. You were liable unless you worked in coal mining, farming or the Merchant Navy. You served for 18 months and then stayed on a reserve list for four years. Conscripted ended in 1960, and might have ended sooner had not the Korean War broken out in June 1950. National Service started to wind down in 1957 and ended in 1960, with the last conscript leaving the Forces in 1963.

For some, military training had begun at school. Typically almost all fee-paying schools and many grammar schools would have optional – sometimes compulsory – training from about 14, called the OTC before war and the CCF (combined cadet force) after it.

Once a week I went to school in khaki uniform for square bashing in the afternoon. There was a .22 rifle range, and the whole business of war was rather fun. The officers were masters who had been through WW1 and some of them clearly showed the effects of shellshock and gas, but we just thought they were mad.

Most Sunday nights were reserved for cleaning equipment. As this was all leather and brass, it would take the best part of two hours. At that time the BBC, every Sunday at 8pm, relayed Albert Sandler and the Palm Court Orchestra from the Grand Hotel, Eastbourne. So, to the sound of those saccharine strings playing *In a Monastery Garden* or some other choice offering, I would make with the polish – tins of ox-blood and dark tan mixed for the leather, Brasso for the rest. The fumes filled the room.

We had field days, and an annual camp at Aldershot or Salisbury Plain. I did not enjoy these affairs very much; it seemed to me that the male animal became even more male and a lot more animal when away from home.

We attended lectures on what to do in the event of a nuclear attack, which included thrusting a wicked-looking needle into the thigh and squeezing the rubber bladder containing God knows what into our blood stream. We then had to don an anti-radiation suit that took for ever to put on, by which time we would all would have been dead.

He was lucky. It's estimated that in the 1950s over 20,000 British servicemen were exposed to radioactive fallout from atmospheric nuclear tests, many dressed in no more than khaki desert fatigues, and simply told to turn and face away from the explosion.

There were 100,000 conscripts in Germany alone, and the last days of the British Empire saw troops engaged in Malaya, Singapore, Cyprus, Aden, Kenya and the Suez Canal, as well as in peacekeeping roles in places like Java, which hadn't been a British colony at all.

I volunteered and went to York for six weeks, then Anglesey. I was sent to Java after the war ended, and flew out via India. Our job was to return Indonesia after the Jap occupation to its pre-war Dutch rule, but the locals didn't want it, and there was a strong resistance movement which soon spilled over into a civil war. We were supposed to keep the peace under Mountbatten while the Dutch civil administration