




NATIONAL SERVICE REMEMBERED

Conscription through the eyes of the men who served.

NAME: Mike Smith
BASE: Northern Ireland
DATE OF ENTRY: 1947



I'm 84 now and I was 21 when I went in. I got deferred because I had a trade to learn, but when you get to the end of your trade training, you're earning full money and you've got girlfriends and you want to get married. So, to have to go into the army was a heck of a climbdown. My call up was in Liverpool where I had my medical to find out if I was fit. Then they interview you.

You had to have filled your form in, and we knew that you always put down the navy as your first preferred option because you weren't going to get it. But you might get your second pick, so I chose the RAF because my dad was in the RAF during the war. Anyway, I had my interview and this chap did his utmost to get me to sign on, that's the first thing they do. They don't want two years, they say 'sign on for the extra year, for three years and then we'll give you the RAF'.

I said no thank you, so in the end I was interviewed to go into the Army. I went in very reluctantly and I went in the 15th/19th King's Royal Hussars.


When I first went in, I realised that I was one of the eldest on the truck. A lot of those youngsters were just 18, and they'd never been away from home before. They thought I knew what I was doing, that as I was older, I was a father figure, but it soon wore off when they realised that I was no better than anybody else. But that's the kind of attitude that you do get in the British Army. I didn't want to go, and I let everybody who was involved with my training know that, but I shouldn't have done it. For some people, the army was their life, and they didn't like the likes of me trying to pull it down. There were times when I should have kept my mouth shut and said to myself 'yes, it's alright here and I'm making some good friends'.

I would have been better thought of and I would have got better treatment and it would have been a smoother passage for me.

"Telling people like my Sergeant Major that I just didn't like his army was not the thing to do."

I was stationed in Northern Ireland and we spent 12 months there which was, on reflection, a lovely place and we met some lovely people. We were based at what was an old American RAF camp which was used to fly over Northern Ireland to patrol the North Sea in the war years, to help spot submarines. It was an old baronial home called Castle Archdale. We went into one of the rooms that had been used as an operations room during the war. The last observations about the flights that had been taken were still written on the original chalkboards. I was in there in 1958 so that's a few years after the war had finished.

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We worked with the police because when we were on patrols, we had to take a policeman with us, he made us official if you like, and so we always had a policeman in our patrol. Army lads enjoyed themselves, and drinking came into this enjoyment quite considerably. My regiment used to go into Enniskillen at the weekend. There were dances there and some of the Irish girls used to take to us. Occasionally some of the lads kicked over the traces and the police would lock them up. And sometimes, the Sergeant Major had to go down the following morning to get these young fellas out so they could go on patrols. But the ironic twist to all this was that sometimes they'd sit in the back of the armoured cars on patrol with the same policeman who'd locked them up the night before. That went down a bomb but these policemen were smashing lads.

“The Colonel in Chief of my regiment, the Hussars, was Princess Margaret. While we were in Belfast, we had to provide a guard for her.”

Eventually, we got transferred from Northern Ireland to a training Regiment in Darlington, where our job was to train different regiments how to drive armoured vehicles, to teach them how to use radios and some gunnery training too.

It was an interesting situation because these young fellas were of the higher end of the families, and some had had their names put down in the different regiments, in the guards, since they were born. We called these young fellas ‘the blues’, that is the top regiments of the British Army, and most of them were very educated lads. And we were just run of the mill, off the road soldiers and we had to drill them. So I thought if the army will educate me, I'll go to night school in Darlington, and the army did decide to pay my fees so I used to go off once a week into Darlington to do my studies. My father, who was in the RAF during the war, he said to me ‘son, never take responsibility unless you're being paid for it’.

They tried to make me up into a Lance Corporal because they said I'd need to be to be able to teach these youngsters. Unfortunately, I didn't make the grade for it, but they still wanted me to do the training, and I thought I'm not going to accept all responsibility of training these youngsters. But then they used me to train some of the lads who were awkward, or were untrainable as a driver, and I used to end up with them. And I used to take them apart and take them away and train them in a totally different way than the army wanted, and it worked.

So, I got all the oddballs, all the ones who were completely naïve towards driving and that part worked out well.

“Before you finally get de-mobbed, they have an agent whose job it is to sign you up, and if they wanted you to stay in, they would intensify their approach to you.”

The Colonel in Chief of my regiment, the Hussars, was Princess Margaret. While we were in Belfast, we had to provide a guard for her. After she landed at Nutts Corner, she was brought over and inspected us before she went into Government House. Now what we didn't realise, was that as long as she was on her feet and out of bed, we had to stand guard, and so we were out there in the middle of the night on guard. Princess Margaret at the time was a very young lady and she enjoyed the company of the young officers to our regiment, and she danced pretty well the night through. When she left, she did another inspection. As she walked past us and looked at us all, there were certain lads in our regiment who were well known for being ladies men, and they were tough fellas but they fell in love with Princess Margaret. She was absolutely gorgeous. She had these crystal blue eyes that were brilliant, and for every lad in the regiment on guard duty at that time, she had the same effect on us all.

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Anyway, off she went to Nutts Corner and we came back off guard duty and regimental standby, and we went into our billets and threw all our gear onto the floor. All our gear had been blanched white, it was immaculate, but we threw them down the room and said 'that's the end of that!' My kit ended up on a shelf at the end of the billet which had old coffee cups on it which splashed my kit. And then we get the instruction to reform the guard because she was coming back because the airport was closed! So we all had to find our gear, put it back on and some of mine was covered in coffee, but there we were standing there for her to inspect us all yet again, so that's the way that went.

Some people ask 'would you give that 2 years up?' One of my Sergeant Majors had been through the Second World War. He wasn't a big man, but when he spoke, he spoke in a certain way and you did as you were told. He knew all the tricks and I learnt a few things from him. The army was his life and he looked on us soldiers as his family, he really did. He'd give us hell at times, but we all put together to buy him a farewell present. He's one of the people that I can honestly say really did affect my approach to how you handle people.

We learnt in the army how to get the best without getting caught, without getting pinched, without getting sent down or put on a charge. We learnt how to get the best out of the British Army and that helped me in my life.

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When we went to Carlisle for training, I was on the train with a lad who was from Liverpool. He was in my troop and I made a good friend of him. When I got back on my train, when I got de-mobbed, I felt really good. That day is one of the best days you can ever witness. Anyway, who should I meet sitting on the train but my scouse mate.

Another one of my best pals was called up on the same day as me. He went into the artillery and I went in the Hussars, but we both got de-mobbed on the same day. We met up on our first night of freedom. Wow, that's a heck of a good feeling when you do finally get out, because you were back in touch with your life and you could pick up where you'd left off.

It was brilliant getting back to normal life. Now, all these years later there are four of us and we meet once a week on a Friday in the pub. All of us did our National Service and we've all got a different tale to tell. When you sit there with a pint in your hand and we start on this telling tales, you can tell everyone else in the pub thinks 'oh my god, they're at it again, have they got nothing else to talk about'. They can't relate to it at all and they can't talk about their experiences because they haven't had any. We were trained up to fight, and what people don't realise is that we can't do without the British Army. There is a saying that you have in the army, that you never lose them, that they are always there.

