

MY NATIONAL SERVICE DEREK V CAVE

My 18th birthday was in November 1949, and my call up papers, together with a rail voucher to Oswestry, came in March 1950,

I don't know, at this distance of time, how much was decided by me, and how much for me, but as I guessed that most of my life would involve paperwork, I would like my military service to be totally different and somewhere overseas. So it proved when I was recruited to the Royal Artillery Training Depot and later posted to Malta – soon to be transferred to The Suez Canal Zone, Egypt. (I am fully aware that some recruits called up in later years were unlucky to be posted to real war zones).

I was born and brought up in Aldershot (Hampshire) then, and for many years later, the Home of the British Army. On my mother's side, the men mainly had a military career, so I and my siblings were steeped in military matters long before my National Service. My father later became secretary of the local British Legion.

I'm sure that all the other recollections submitted by members recount the rude shock of the early transfer from civilian to military life. The very tough time that we had from bombardiers (corporals) and sergeants, had to be experienced to be believed, and the language used..... It was only at the end of our training that we realised that they had "tried to turn boys into men". I was chosen for a three day War Office Selection Board at Barton Stacey in Hampshire, which I failed, not to my surprise (I passed all the paperwork side).

I was in the Grammar School Cadet Force, and also had joined a .22 rifle club, so I already had a limited knowledge of small firearms. But now I was in the Royal Artillery, so our basic training included the 25 pounder gun (rather similar to those fired on The Queen's Birthday). A Firing Camp in Wales included firing real shells.

At the end of training I was posted to Malta to join a Heavy Anti Aircraft Regiment, using 3.7 inch guns – a big change from the 25 pounder guns I had trained on. The guns were controlled by mobile radar sets, and it was soon evident that they were now useless against "modern" jet aircraft.

After three or four months in Malta, the whole regiment was shipped to the Suez Canal Zone, as things were starting to "hot up" following Egypt's stated desire to take back control of that zone. (This culminated in Britain's disastrous invasion in the mid fifties, when I had long been demobilised).

However, relations with the local population became very difficult, and the whole zone was put "on active service". Our Regiment was put on dock labour duties at Port Said, and I was put in charge of some of the soldiers on those duties. (Our only casualty was a fatality when two good friends played around with a loaded rifle).

Our camp was fully tented at a place called Geneifa, and we could easily see (to the west) ships sailing along the Suez Canal, as this part of Egypt, although sandy, was flat. One of my uncles was an officer based at Ismailia, the army HQ, roughly halfway down the Suez Canal Zone. I visited him, and my auntie and children, for Christmas. As it was during the time of Active Service he could not drive me all the way back to my camp and, against his instructions to wait for a convoy, tired of waiting, set off with my loaded Sten gun. I did make it back to camp, much to the amazement of the guards at my camp. Very foolish, and could have cost me my life.

Active Service meant that all leave was cancelled, so my planned trip to see the Pyramids was not on. The CO realised that this decision would affect many in his regiment, so he organised a “do it yourself” trip to Saint Catherine’s monastery in the Sinai Desert, using army vehicles and sleeping under the stars. What an amazing trip, and I can understand why this is now in the holiday brochures.

The above is a brief summary of some of my two years of National Service. You will understand that it opened up a whole range of experiences (not all pleasant) that I would not have encountered in civilian life, and it delayed my attention to my future working life, and studies to qualify as an accountant. But – I would not have missed it for the two years of civilian life I would otherwise have had. I met people from “The North” with different accents and backgrounds, so it opened up my horizons. That is not to say that I would recommend it, but it was a case of “force majeure” – I had no choice.

Finally, I must put my Service against the realities of life in the late forties:-

Rigid social class structures, beginning to unfold
People tied to their localities, usually for life
Austerity still partly in place after the war
Education many years away from opening up
Europe still in the process of coming together
- and so on.

I would probably have spent my life living in the South East, believing that “The North” began at Watford, and largely having no contact with people from other parts of the country, who spoke with different accents, and had different backgrounds e.g. manufacturing.

Would I recommend National Service for the youth of today, especially those of a criminal nature? Well, that would be a good debate.

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ADDENDA

These are not of general interest, but come under the heading of “things that happened to me during and after National Service” that I would not have otherwise experienced.

1. About three months after arriving in the Canal Zone another Bombardier (Michael Montague – now deceased) and myself were called to see the CO of our regiment, and later the GOC Egypt. In their opinion we should take a WOSB again, and were duly flown back to the UK in a Dakota propeller engine plane. After some time at the depot we duly took, and both failed, the three days of tests. We caught a troopship back to Egypt. Michael later went on to be a notable businessman, and held various governmental posts. He then was made a Life Peer as Baron Montague of Oxford.

2. Robert (Spud) C was demobilised at the same time as me, but as we had been friendly during our National Service he said that we should meet up later and stay on a friendly basis for as long as it lasted. I lived in Hampshire and he lived in Berkshire. When I had acquired transport (a second hand motorcycle) I was invited to his house. It was made clear by the locals in his village that this was "the big 'ouse" as indeed it was. After lunch Spud showed me round the very extensive gardens and house. We met a number of times, and he took me to play Real Tennis (as played by Henry III). When he came to Aldershot we did some night trials (long since banned). Our friendship lasted about two years before it naturally faded away (huge disparity in wealth and social connections).
