

John Powell

Memoirs of military service

Joining up

John begins his memoir by introducing himself and telling how he was born in the capital city Cardiff in 1938. In a later video film, John tells of his childhood experiences living in the suburbs of Cardiff during World War Two, but for now he moves straight into receiving his call up papers, to complete National Service in the British Army.

Training

Initially, in 1957 John joins a unit he describes as “the Welsh Regiment” and he completed the basic army recruit training course with this regiment. Shortly after passing out a representative of the Parachute regiment attended the barracks and invited soldiers to volunteer for Parachute infantry training. John “jumped” at the chance to join “the Paras” and soon found himself taking on the infamous “P course” All soldiers wishing to become Parachutists in the British Army must successfully complete P course, or P company, as it is more widely known. John did indeed pass the course and he describes how proud he felt, before telling the viewer about Parachuting from aircraft. He enjoys describing the experience of Parachuting and recounts one “drop” in particular.

Holding company

John is posted to C Company 2nd battalion Parachute regiment and moves into Talavera barracks, Aldershot. This is where the Parachute regiment continues to develop the skills of it's soldiers at platoon and company level. He recounts an interesting memory of platoon training on Bodmin moor and refers back to this period a little later in the film.

Cyprus

The Island was experiencing a volatile period during the latter part of the 1950's. British forces were stationed on the island seeking to maintain a fragile peace. Sometime between April and July 1958, C company was sent on a short-term deployment to support the resident Parachute battalion conducting anti insurgency operations in Cyprus. John recalls some interesting experiences of this period, in particular the hunt for a British Army Bren Gun, allegedly lost by a Welsh regiment. His time in Cyprus was however cut short, as the success of the Arab leader President Nasser, was threatening the peace and security of the middle eastern country Jordan. The leader King Hussein was on friendly terms with the United Kingdom and asked the government for help in avoiding a military coup.

Amman, Jordan

In answer to this call for help, the UK government despatched the 16th Parachute infantry brigade. C Company of 2 Para, were included in this show of force and in July 1958 John and his colleagues found himself landing at Amman airport, immediately deploying to bolster the security of the facility. Over the coming days and weeks, the Paras expanded the perimeter to offer an overt presence in Jordan, in an effort to deter aggression from internal and external military forces. These forces, in particular a cavalry battalion equipped with Soviet Tanks, had been emboldened by President Nassers victory in the brief but disastrous Suez war. John describes what life was like for the average British soldier in the desert at this time.

John revisits a painful memory, where he witnesses the execution of several prisoners, found to be plotting against the Jordanian King. The patrols the Paras make on a daily basis , brings them into close contact with the local population and exposes them to sudden traumatic events.

He asks the interviewer to read a letter he had written home to his parents on 24th July 1958. The letter had been written by John, as he was resting, following an extended period manning the outer defences in the valley where the Paras tented camp was located. The letter is an extraordinarily well written description of the situation he found himself in. Indeed this letter is a powerful reminder of a time when National Servicemen were serving overseas in regions where conflict and danger were never far away. Choice was not an option for John and his colleagues completing their national service.

There is not much left to be said after the letter ends. It leaves a poignant feeling in the air and John's pleasant disposition leaves the viewer with feeling of respect for these young men and women.