

## Michael Knibbs (1954-). British Army & Royal Navy

### Saundersfoot

West Wales Veterans Archive  
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#### Corporal Michael Knibbs

I was born on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1954 in Southlands Hospital Shoreham By Sea, West Sussex. I lived in Lancing, West Sussex until I was 10 years old when due to my father's work at Gatwick Airport, we moved to Crawley, West Sussex.

On arriving in Crawley I joined the Nautical Training Corps, which is very similar to the Sea Cadets. I learnt Seamanship and how to play the bugle in the band. I was also a Drum Major winning many Best Drum Major contests. I was schooled at Ifield Comprehensive School in Crawley where my mother was Head Cook in the school canteen.

#### Royal Navy

I left school at 15 years of age and almost immediately joined the Royal Navy on 20<sup>th</sup> April 1970. I joined HMS Ganges and was billeted in Leander mess in the New Entry Division at the annex across the road from the main establishment. Following completion of my New Entry Division Training, I moved across the road to the main establishment and joined Hawke Division 9 mess on the Long-Covered way just off of the quarter deck.

I joined the HMS Ganges Bugle band where I was taught many Royal Navy and Royal Marines bugle calls by Bugler Dave Hatfield of the Royal Marines. One fantastic opportunity I had was to play at the Royal Tournament in 1970, opening the whole show.

I became quite a competent bugler, and it was suggested that I may get better if I transferred to the Royal Marines School of Music in Deal Kent. I had an audition which I passed with flying colours. I then transferred in October 1970 after serving for a few months: I had the obligatory visit to the dentist where I was informed that as I had dentures on the top set of teeth, I could not be a bugler in the Royal Marines even though I could play very well.

After being called to the Bugle Majors office, I was advised that I was being discharged as the rules were "no one can be accepted to play a wind instrument with a deformity to the top lip or teeth, so that was that and I joined civilian street in

the December of 1970.

I found employment at a sweet factory and a factory making tools, but I wasn't happy as I loved the military life. I visited the Army recruiting office in Horsham, West Sussex and passed my entrance exam to join the Army.

### Leaving the Navy and joining the British Army

I joined the Queens Regiment and was stationed at The Depot the Queens Division at Basingbourn Barracks near Royston Nr Cambridge. I started my Infantry training lasting 18 weeks, passing off the square. After six weeks we could wear full uniform and have two weeks' leave. I was granted an extra week if I volunteered to work in the local Recruiting office in Horsham visiting local schools with the Sargent Major talking to young school leavers who were interested in joining the Armed forces.

The Queens Regiment was the local Home Counties Regiment covering Kent, Sussex, Surrey, & Middlesex, and was the senior English regiment in the English Army tracing its history back to formation in 1572 as the Holland Regiment formed as a band of mercenaries by Queen Elisabeth 1<sup>st</sup> to fight in the 100-year Holland wars. Returning to England after the war, the military Footage was given to all British Regiments and the Queens Regiment were given 2nd of Foot.

### Germany

After my basic training and passing out parade, I was posted to the second battalion the Queens Regiment in Werl, West Germany. On arrival in Germany, alone and not speaking German, I needed to get a train from the airport to Werl. I found it very hard to explain to the train ticket office where I was going, at last I wrote Werl down and got my ticket. I boarded the train and started my journey. After some while I got worried that I had passed my station so I got off the train at Essen as I had heard the name, needless to say I was some way away from Werl so I thought I would get a taxi and go straight to the camp. This I did and the cost of the taxi ride was 120DM - all the money I had in the world. Lesson learnt!

I joined C Company and then transferred to the Recce Platoon for a few weeks. I was hunted down by the Drum Major as my records showed I was a good bugler. I was asked if I was interested in joining the Corps of Drums which I jumped at and that's where a fantastic career started. Most people believe that the Corps of Drums are part of the band, but they are not. They are a totally separate platoon who are Soldiers first and musicians second whereas the Band are musicians and medical orderlies during war. I learnt all the bugle calls that I needed to become Duty Bugler having to sound 32 bugles calls every day.

I got to know the RSM very well as well as all the Company Sgt Majors. When I got extra duties, I did them as Duty Bugler, saving me going through extra duties and parading at 22:00 hrs every evening in best kit. I remember on a few occasions the

Duty officer saying "Sgt there is one restriction of privileges missing from Defaulters" coming to attention shouting out "I'm here Sir" which really threw them.

### Bulford, Northern Ireland and Belize

On leaving Werl three years later, I was posted to Bulford in Wiltshire to Kiwi Barracks not far from Salisbury. Whilst stationed there, I had my first tour of three of Northern Ireland. Four months in a not very nice area of Belfast. I returned from Northern Ireland to carry out a Canoeing instructor's course at the Joint Services Mountain Training Centre Towyn, North Wales.

Another posting whilst at Bulford was a six-month posting to Belize in the Caribbean where I was a canoeing instructor on St Georges Kays for a while and I loved it. Jungle Warfare training was obligatory so off up country we went for a few weeks.

I spent most of my time in Belize at Airport Camp the main camp. We took all our equipment including Drums and put on musical shows for the locals including a Queen's Birthday parade which we all found hard as the temperature was 120 degrees in the shade. My best mate Rob passed out due to the heat that day. He didn't get charged as we were all suffering.

Myself and my mate, Dennis Oliver, travelled to Mexico on R&R - what a trip that was. I was the driver of a huge Ford Ltd car, the biggest car I had ever driven. Our RSM had signed a document to say he would take responsibility for the condition of the car on return, well just my luck I hit a corner of a wall and smashed the wing of the car. We found a garage to repair the wing which it did, and you would never have known it was damaged and it cost me next to nothing, so we were happy and never got caught.

Belize was a fun posting most of the time; Reveille was 06:00 and we started with a 5-mile run then Breakfast. We worked up to 12:00 and spent the rest of the day in the swimming pool as it was far too hot to work. I was seen swimming and was selected for the Battalion swimming team taking on the RAF & Royal Navy along with other Regiments such as Royal Engineers who were also stationed in Belize.

Our tour of Belize lasted 6 months and on return, we were posted once again to Belfast. On this tour we did shifts of 4 days change around, 24hr of Foot patrol doing 4 hours patrolling 2 hours rest, then 24 hours Key point guards again doing 4 hours on 4 hours rest then 24 hours Mobile patrol split into 12 hours immediate Standby and 12 hours mobile patrol. By this time, it was 1977 the Queens Silver Jubilee year so we were very, very active with riots taking place nearly every day.

On one patrol we were tasked to patrol the Upper Springfield Road in West Belfast paying attention to a Turf accountants. Well I was just a country boy and had never heard of a turf accountant, so I spent an hour looking for a place that sold grass.

When I radioed in that I couldn't find any grass shops I was given 5 extra duties for being a fool, again another lesson learnt.

During that tour we had many contacts with the IRA on a daily basis, but we all came home safe and sound not for the wanting of the IRA. On returning to Bulford, Wiltshire we were off again on another posting this time it was to be Gibraltar.

#### Gibraltar, Tunisia, Malta, Yugoslavia and back to Northern Ireland

I received my first promotion in Gibraltar to Lance Corporal Drummer. I was called to the CO's office and given my first stripe. As I left his office the RSM called me into his office and asked me why I was incorrectly dressed. I had no idea what he was going on about then the penny dropped, the Army being the Army I was caught on the hop, I was promoted but didn't have a jumper with a stripe already sewn on it, so I was busted after 2 minutes. I had to go and sew a stripe on a jumper and return to the RSM's office and show him my arm with stripe. He then gave me my stripe he had taken from me saying "first lesson Corporal Knibbs - be prepared when being promoted".

During my time in Gibraltar, I was attached to a Royal Navy Frigate, a Type 21 Frigate, HMS Arrow as a bugler. HMS Arrow was the newest ship in the Royal Navy and as a Bugler knowing all the Royal Navy bugle calls, I was selected to serve on board this state-of-the-art ship.

I was welcomed on board in Gibraltar Harbour by the crew and was accommodated in three mess with the cooks and Store men. What a time we had on that tour, around the Mediterranean visiting Malta, Tunisia, and Split in Yugoslavia. HMS Arrow was the first ship to visit Split since World War 2 (WW2) and it was still communist ruled at the time of our visit.

My main responsibilities to carry out bugling duties on board ship and as we entered Harbours. Our first port of call was Tunis in Tunisia. As we entered the Harbour, procedure Alpha was called where the ship's company line the ship in full uniform. I was on the Bridge head playing General salute before docking and being allowed ashore. I also played last post at the British and commonwealth war cemetery with a RN Guard of honour.

Tunisia had a curfew at the time as some terrorist had tried to assassinate the King, so we had to be off the streets by 23:59 hours or in a taxi heading back to the ship. We were there for four days and were invited to a BBQ on the beach by the CEO of BP oil Tunisia which was very enjoyable.

While we were at that BBQ, the ship had invited a school on board for a visit and sandwiches. The trouble was, no one told the chefs that the school was Jewish, and they laid on Ham sandwiches and sausage rolls.

We left Tunisia and headed to Malta arriving at the entrance to Grand Harbour. Again me with a Guard of honour on the bridge head playing General Salute to the Flag Officer Malta. We anchored in the harbour and had to get ashore by ships boat or water taxi known as a Diso. We spent another three days in Malta again visiting the War Cemetery playing the Last Post and spending time down Straight Street (AKA The GUTT) in and out of all the different bars and having fun with the Americans who were also there.

First night in, I was volunteered as Shore patrol so on with the NP arm band and off in a land rover with the Leading Regulator (RN Police) working alongside the RAF Police (snowdrops) patrolling and picking up sailors after a few beers and saving them getting into any trouble.

Split in the Former Yugoslavia was a strange place. HMS Arrow was the first war ship to visit since WW2. We were met by the whole town as we pulled alongside the jetty. Once again, I played the General Salute with the guard of honour and visited another WW2 cemetery to play Last Post along with some Yugoslavian Buglers.

After spending many hours in the town bars and being questioned about our ship and its equipment by the KGB, we returned onboard leaving two days later heading towards the Mediterranean, down the Adriatic Sea where we were intercepted by a Russian gun boat telling us to go back as we were going the wrong way. Well there is only one way out of the Adriatic and that's the same way as coming in. Our Capitan Cmdr Bill Davis messaged the Gun boat to go away! I was ordered to play Clear upper Decks and standby. Our Helicopter was sent up to monitor what was going on and the Capitan over the tannoy system said "Take your gun boat away from my war ship or I will blow you out of the Oggin" (sailor talk for sea). After about 5 minutes the gun boat went away (job done).

Sailing on the Adriatic and into the Mediterranean was fantastic with dolphins jumping along side passing Malta and back to Gibraltar. The last night at sea the Navy have a tradition called a sods opera and as it was my last night, the skipper permitted it to take place a day early so I could take part. Well I was dressed up in a white sheet with gold cardboard wings and told I was the Angel Gabriel. I had to fill a bucket up with bits of paper and when told I had to throw it over the skipper and 1<sup>st</sup> Officer who were sitting in the front seats. I spent all day ripping up bits of paper and putting it in a bucket, then a few beers to pass the day and at 19:00 hrs, it started with a very bewildered version of Jesus Christ Superstar.

The time came for me to throw the bucket of paper over the VIP's and being worst for wear on beer I swung around a beam saying, "hello sailors fly me". I picked up the bucket and threw it up in the air, the paper came out and then a block of foot powder went above their head and landed all over them. My mess mates had stitched me up and put foot powder in the bottom of the bucket. Luckily the skipper and Number one had a sense of humor and laughed as much as we did.

Returning to Gibraltar, I left the ship while the crew sung "we all agree Percy Pongo is magic", the Navy slang for Army, what a tour. Back in Gibraltar another tour in

Northern Ireland and for security reasons I can't say much about this tour although to say it was a hard tour.

### Civilian Life

On my return I decided that I didn't want to risk another tour so I bought myself out after 11-½ years service and returned to Civilian Street, but my military service didn't stop there as I joined the Territorial Army and served a further 4 years with 6/7 Battalion The Queens Regiment keeping my rank as a Corporal, but due to my work I found it hard to give 100% so I had to leave. I did, however, join the Cadets as an adult instructor for over 10 years.

I then worked at Gatwick Airport doing flight catering, then changed direction and joined the Security Industry and after 25 years working for private security companies including Tesco, John Lewis and a huge shopping Centre attending a lot of Security courses I became a Security trainer for the Security Industry Authority. I trained Security Officers, Shopping Centre Security officers, Cash and Valuables in transit, Security Vetting and started my own business as a Security Training Consultant training for the National Open Collage network.

On Retirement, my wife and I moved to Tenby in Pembrokeshire where we had a holiday home for many years, spending much of our time in Saundersfoot where I have served on the Community Council for just about 2 years. I am the Councilor responsible for planning and taking charge of the Remembrance service at our local War Memorial. My wife also volunteers for Guide Dogs Pembrokeshire.