

Dennis Pikes (1932-) British Army Ffostrasol

West Wales Veterans Archive

Dates of Interviews: Summer/Autumn 2022. Ffostrasol

Interviewers: Hugh Morgan & Steve Munro

Dennis Pikes

Dennis Pikes was born 18.4.1932 in Dorstone, Herefordshire, England, but with his birth being registered in nearby Hay Dennis is really Welsh! His father ran a wheelwright and carpenter. Dennis' grandfather ran a wheelwright and carpenter company in Dorstone with several family members working in the business.

Evacuees, School, Apprenticeship

Dennis attended the All Saints Primary School and then the Lord Scudamore school in Hereford. Following the outbreak of WW2 he recalls that evacuees arrived in the area and attended the Lord Scudamore school for the mornings only and all the male teachers left to join the army education corps. The wives of these departing teachers replaced them in the school and Dennis remembers four pupils to every two-seater desk and *'If they could keep the class in control with us packed into our seats, then that's as much as they could manage'*. To occupy the children, the wives would simply read books to the class and with no formal teaching taking place, Dennis describes the school as being the *'duffest school ever'*.

In 1946 and by then aged 14yrs old, Dennis' father announced that as he hadn't learnt a single thing in school, he had better finish and suggested Dennis train as a cabinet maker. His father took him to the Juvenile Employment Centre where he was told that whilst they didn't any apprenticeships for cabinet makers, but they had vacancies for upholsterers. After a week's trial with a local firm Dennis was taken on a four-year apprenticeship as an upholsterer with the possibility of a fifth. Dennis found the work far less inspiring than working with wood, so it was with a sense of relief that when he turned 18yrs he was conscripted into the British Army.

King's Shropshire Light Infantry (KSLI).

In October 1950 Dennis was instructed to report to Bordon Camp in Hampshire. Being from Herefordshire he was placed into the King's Shropshire Light Infantry (KSLI). Basic training was 10weeks and then after a further 5 weeks skills training, he was posted to 'D' Company of the 1st KSLI Battalion. Dennis fondly remembers that *'we had two of the best officers that anyone could have in the British Army, Major James Cottle was our CO and his second in command, 2nd Lieutenant Lt Andrew Borick'*.

D' company was then posted to Hong Kong carrying our light infantry training which Dennis recalls involved a lot of marching and being based in the New Territories. 'D' Company didn't know much about

the Korean War at that point and they understood they were being sent to Malaya and were issued with the Short Lee Enfield Rifle.

This changed Dennis says, when the 'Glorious Glosters' made their famous last stand at Imjin River in Korea in April 1951, the Battalion were ordered to hand back their new rifles and equipment and were shipped out to Korea to replace the Middlesex Regiment. Some of the Middlesex Regiment personnel hadn't been out in Korea for very long and so they were transferred to the KSLI thereby remaining in Korea. A minimum age requirement of 20yrs had set for service in Korea so those members of 'D' Company who had not yet turned 20yrs old, remained in Hong Kong.

'D' Company arrived in Incheon and were sent up to the Imjin River where the Chinese had dropped back after their attack on the Glosters. Dennis and his comrades walked patrols in the shallow river, entering Chinese held territory, where they could see the Chinese and then drop back. During these patrols, neither the Chinese nor 'D' Company engaged with each other.

Dennis 'Eventually we pushed forward into the Yellow River which opens up into China and then pulled back to the 38th Parallel, which had become the dividing-line. We continued to carry out patrols along and beyond the 38th Parallel until we could see the Chinese and then we'd drop back. We noticed that a lot of the Chinese soldiers were 15/16yrs old, and really they were only schoolkids.

Dennis remembered an incident when they went forward on patrol 'into a village which had been evacuated full of basha huts made of straw. Although we had our rifles at the ready we weren't expecting anything then all of a sudden, we were surrounded by what we thought were Chinese soldiers and though immediately that we were in trouble. But it turned out that that these were South Korean soldiers, who were on our side'.

In addition to being a rifleman in 'C' Section in 'D' Company Dennis also operated one the several Bren Guns which 'D' Company had acquired which he describes as 'a wonderful little gun, accurate and could fire single or multiple rounds. The Chinese used come quite often in the evening and so we did quite a bit of fighting. The seasons in Korea were very different. In the wet season it would rain all night long, then the next day the sun would come out so we could dry off and the then late in the afternoon the rain would come down and would get soaked through again. This would last for a couple of months.

Dennis recalled another incident 'We were out on a listening patrol when we heard people coming towards us. They were Chinese soldiers who had come along the range listening to our people. We walked up this path as the Chinese were coming towards us, some of whom had rifles across their shoulders. We pushed passed them and went one way and they went the other! No shots fired and they were probably as frightened as we were.

'Major Cottle and Lt Borick were with us for about half the tour and were then relieved and sent back to a position behind the lines. A new Major and 2nd Lieutenant came into replace them, and I can't even remember their names. Compared to Major Cottle and Lt Borick, they didn't make any impression upon us. Major Cottle was bit like your Dad. He wasn't that much older than us but funnily enough he came from Hereford and had two brothers who were teachers at the High School in Hereford. Both Major Cottle and Lt Borick treated us well and they both always led from the front. There were two other officers and I can also remember the strange case of a Sergeant who must have been about 40yrs old who handed his stripes in and returned to being a Private'. Dennis recalled promotions being offered by Lt Borick to those who had been in Korea for some time but none of them wanted the responsibility of

having a stripe to become a Lance-Corporal, so new arrivals were given immediate promotions. Dennis rationalized *'it was hard enough looking after yourself without looking after anybody else.*

Whilst coming through Korea unscathed, others in 'D' Company were not so lucky. Dennis recalled being on patrol when they came suddenly upon a hidden Chinese position. One of his section pointed ahead at the figure instead of raising his rifle and shooting at the enemy. This momentary lapse cost him his life as the Chinese gunner riddled him with a burst of machine gun fire.

Dennis served in Korea for 12 months, in effect a very long tour of duty. He was then given 5 days leave spent in a leave camp in Tokyo before returning to the UK by ship on the HMS Empire Orwell arriving back home in August 1952. Thereafter he spent some days in Copthorne Barracks before being posted home of leave whereupon his service finished.

After his two years in the Army, Dennis returned to the upholstery firm which by now was under new ownership, and remained with them until he got married in 1955. The business had to close and as Dennis' father-in-law was a painter and decorator, he went to work for him where he was mainly doing carpentry. Sadly after a year, his father in law died and Dennis carried on with the business until a compulsory purchase by the Council meant that the business had lost its premises and had to close. Dennis' first wife died aged at just 31 yrs and for some years Dennis continued to live in the family home with his young son and run the family business from there. Some years later he re-married and eventually moved to West Wales. He still lives in West Wales in the Ffostrasol area near to his daughter and family.