

Leslie Frank Smart

British Army

Gloucestershire regiment

Ceredigion



West Wales Veterans Archive

*** Viewer caution – This film contains descriptions of confrontation with armed enemies and may cause emotional upset. Discretion is advised.

Aide memoir to Film ONE of the interview with Leslie Smart

The viewer will note that on occasion the interviewer can be heard on the film, directing questions to Leslie. The interviewer's voice was included for the viewer to understand the context of Leslie's conversation. When this interview was filmed Leslie was 93 years of age.

Description

Leslie was born in Tetbury, a small rural town in Gloucestershire. After leaving school he worked on his fathers Poultry farm. His father contracted Tuberculosis and Leslie took over running of the farm as a teenager. This was a life he loved, but he struggled with the low pay, so he became a Paint sprayer at a local Agricultural manufacturing company. However, he was at the factory for only two months when in 1952 he was called to complete mandatory national service. Leslie completed three months with the Gloucestershire regiment, before signing as a regular soldier. He served for seven years as a regular infantry soldier, with a notable overseas posting in Kenya.

Early life

Leslie has vivid memories of a childhood lived under the shadow of World War two and the Luftwaffe bombing raids on Cardiff docks. He describes this later in his interview (Video 3). He recalls his father taking him to a hill, situated near Stroud in Gloucestershire, where he watched squadrons of Luftwaffe Bombers pass overhead, as they travelled towards Bristol and Cardiff docks. He describes watching the dog fights between the fighter escorts and RAF Spitfires intercepting them. On one occasion a Luftwaffe bomber crash lands nearby and local's farmers armed with pitchforks arrest the surviving crew. Les also recalls at age 13 years, looking out across the Severn estuary at the end of May / beginning of June 1944 and seeing ships as far as the eye could see. This was part of the allied naval armada, preparing for the invasion of France.

Joining the Army

In 1952 Leslie joined the Army as a national serviceman and was drafted into the local infantry, the Gloucestershire regiment.

Recruit training

His initial training was undertaken at Knook camp near Warminster, Wiltshire. The camp was originally formed in 1944 to train Allied soldiers for the invasion of France. When Leslie arrived the Nissan huts of the wartime era were still very much in use. Conditions were sparse and there was only a handful of recruits on site, awaiting the arrival of a larger contingent to begin training.

Leslie remembers that when the recruits eventually arrived the regime kicked in and the strict nature of military life became apparent. Looking back with humour, he recalls feeling that the lads who had arrived early were a cut above the new arrivals and already soldiers. As opposed to new recruits. However, this feeling subsided and they were all in together.

Leslie talks about life in the Billet (Barrack room). He shares his feelings of his pride in himself at taking his soldierly duties seriously and "showing out" on parade. His smart appearance regularly excused him more mundane duties. This caused a few problems with other recruits, but his serious attitude towards soldiering stood him well. After three months training, the Officer in charge offered the recruits an opportunity to sign on as a regular soldier. Leslie took this opportunity and was awarded with a promotion to acting Lance Corporal. However, he offers a candid and humorous explanation about a quick demotion back to private. "That's the way it was".

Leslie explains that the regular soldiers, about thirty in total undertook extra training. The initial training was twelve weeks for regular soldiers, as opposed to six weeks for the national servicemen. This extra training allowed Leslie to see more of the UK, with stays at Broughton in



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Devon (Amphibian training) and Stainton Barnard Castle in County Durham, where the regiment was preparing for overseas service in Kenya. He also experienced initial Parachute training at Colchester, but injury stopped any further progress with the Airborne division.

Operational career

In late 1954 his training was completed, and Leslie was now a fully qualified soldier. He travelled with the first battalion, Gloucester regiment to Liverpool, where they embarked on the troop carrier Emperor Halladale. This ship was destined to voyage to Mombasa in Kenya. The Emperor Halladale was a reparation ship from Germany. It had been built in 1921 and was seized by the allies in Denmark in 1945. Leslie remembers it as a “Wonderful old ship”.

The first port of call on the voyage was Gibraltar. Here trained volunteers boarded the ship and joined the regiment. The ship navigated the notorious Bay of Biscay and on through the Suez Canal, before docking at Busan (Pusan) Korea. British troops boarded the ship at Busan. These Troops had finished their posting in Korea and were returning to the UK. An interesting incident occurred at Busan. Leslie was permitted to leave the ship for a short period on land. He encountered a Korean Officer and quite by chance was photographed with him. He remembers the officer making a remark about more British soldiers arriving in Korea to harm Koreans. Leslie was taken aback at the officer’s words. A press officer captured this brief meeting on camera and the photograph became well published, even appearing in a book some years later. After leaving Busan, the ship called at Japan to collect more British Troops to return to the UK. These soldiers had been severely injured in the Korean war and had been recuperating at medical facilities in Japan. The ship eventually arrived at Mombasa, where the regiment disembarked. Here the Gloucestershire soldiers boarded a special train that took them to Nairobi. This journey took two and a half days! Leslie describes this journey, which made a lasting impression on him.

The Gloucestershire Regiment’s posting to Kenya in 1955 was the first of many overseas tours during a period that was to become the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from Empire. Kenya had been in the turmoil for several years because of an insurrection led by the Kikuyu (Mau Mau) tribe against British rule. By 1955, the insurrection was being successfully suppressed and heading for defeat. However, the Glosters had some serious work ahead and would be involved in operations to hunt down and apprehend or kill the many remaining insurgents.

The regiment formed part of 49th Independent Infantry Brigade and relieved the Black Watch at a camp called Gil Gil on 1st April 1955. Companies were allocated areas of responsibility where they set up temporary camps. These camps were frequently on European owned farms. The British soldiers were made very welcome. Soldiers patrolled their areas with the help of local guides, looking for Mau Mau gangs. Leslie was to encounter difficult terrain. Mountains of over 5,000 feet awaited, as well as grass savannah and thick bamboo jungle. Aside from the obvious threat from the Mau Mao gangs, there was the intense heat. The camp was not too far from the Rift valley, famous as being the hottest place on earth. There was also the complication of sometimes hostile wildlife added to the experience and sometimes amusement of the soldiers. Leslie talks about the Mau Mau, local population, terrain and wildlife whilst recalling memories from his time in Kenya.

He talks of being out on long extended patrols, seeking Mau Mau gangs. Patrols could last for two months, being resupplied by Helicopter or Parachute drops. One useful skill Leslie learnt was Barbering and he remembers he used to regularly cut an officer’s hair, Major Forbes. This officer became appalled at the state of “A company’s” hair and lined them up for Leslie to sort out. A



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company is between 100 to 150 soldiers! In fact, he was offered the job as the regimental Barber, but refused. He wanted to be out soldiering on patrol and realised Barbering would hinder this.

Leslie describes a particularly dangerous and shocking patrol. The patrol occurred at night and was led by Corporal Parker. The seven-man patrol was dropped off in an escarpment near the Aberdare Mountain range. Leslie was second in charge and carrying the Bren Gun. He was acting as last man in the patrol, known as Tail end Charlie. He describes how the patrol unwittingly passed a gang of Mau Mau, that were hiding in the bush. The Mau Mau failed to spot Leslie following on behind. Suddenly they came out of the bush in front of him. Fearing for his life, he opened fire, wounding several of the gang. Upon hearing the gun fire, Leslie's colleagues ran back, returning fire towards the gang. The leader of the gang was killed. Leslie explains how he felt frightened patrolling at the back of the patrol but pleased that he did his job right and saved his men from ambush.

Leslie remembers another time when he went out with a soldier to hunt Deer. The food then company was surviving on was mundane. Occasionally soldiers would try and improve the diet by hunting animals. He was on the Savannah when he spotted smoke in the distance. Leslie and his colleague walked toward the smoke, only to find that it originated from a camp. Upon observing the camp he saw a large gang of Mau Mau. The two soldiers quickly retreated to their own camp and reported the sighting to the Officer in charge. An assault party was formed and advanced towards the location of the Mau Mau camp. Leslie led the patrol towards the smoke but upon arrival the Mau Mau had left in a hurry. It transpired that this was a large Mau Mau camp which had been developed. If defended, it would of presented the British soldiers with a formidable challenge and resulted in injuries or worse.

The first film of the interview ends here. In the second film, Leslie continues to talk about life in Kenya with the Gloucestershire regiment in 1955.

*** The photograph of Leslie meeting the Korean officer can be seen in the Leslie Smart collection online at the west Wales Veterans Archive.

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• Our thanks to the National Library of Wales for assisting in the producing and retention of the material.



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