

**Peter Latham 1929-. British Army
Dyfi Estuary, Machynlleth**

West Wales Veterans' Archive, National Library of Wales

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Description

Lieutenant Colonel Peter Latham spent his entire career in the British Army. Born in Wolverhampton in 1929, he entered the Army initially as a National Serviceman, before transferring to the Regular Army and becoming a Commissioned Officer. Peter completed two tours of duty in Hong Kong, and undertook operational postings to Kenya, Germany, as well as the UK. After thirty-four years of service, Peter retired from the Army. He and his wife, Sheila have lived alongside the Dyfi Estuary for over forty years, a move they have never regretted making.

Preamble

This history was written in 2020 in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic when life was in 'lockdown'. Being 'aged' now my memory is not what it used to be so I tried to contact the Army Records Office in order that I could be accurate with places and dates. Alas, they were themselves on 'lockdown' so some dates may well be wrong. Anyhow, let's have a go....

Childhood

I was born in Wolverhampton in 1929. My parents lived in a little place called Brewood which is a small village near Wolverhampton. The family had always been strong Catholics and I went to a succession of Catholic schools progressing to Belmont Abbey in Hereford and finished up at Ratcliffe College near Leicester.

As a teenager during the war my father arranged for me to work alongside the apprentices in the Boulton Paul Aircraft factory in Wolverhampton, making parts for the Boulton Paul Defiant which served in the RAF during the early years of the war.

Call-up for National Service

In late 1947 I was called up for National Service which commenced at Whittington Barracks in Staffordshire. Whittington Barracks was a large complex built in 1881 for the Staffordshire Militia. It was built around a central, very large parade ground. Around the parade ground were a number of large barrack blocks, two stories high. Each block having four barrack rooms in the centre of which were 'ablutions' which consisted of open fronted toilets and great long slabs of slate, with inlaid white porcelain sinks. These sinks had only one cold water tap each.

On the first day our intake collected the kit from the stores, consisting of clothing, bedding and then onto the armoury where we collected a rifle and bayonet, and then back to the

barrack room where we were harangued by the NCOs who told us what we were going to do and what was going to happen to us.

We were allocated a bed and shown how to box our bedding for inspection. We had one steel cabinet and that was about it. Most of the recruits were from the Black Country and there were only two of us who had hailed from public schools. On the first night the two of us got into our pyjamas prior to bed. Suddenly we were surrounded by the other recruits. They hadn't seen pyjamas before and had always gone to bed in their pants and vests. There was much hilarity.

The beds had no mattresses. They were steel pull out frames upon which we put our three 'biscuits' every night. The 'biscuits' were filled with straw and during the night as we slept on them the 'biscuits' managed to spread apart and each morning we would wake up with a pattern down our sides where the steel wires had been. We had little round pillows which were also stuffed with straw.

The following day we were all marched off in quick time to have haircuts where 'short back and sides' was the order of the day. There were agonised howls as cherished locks fell to the ground. From there we were taken to the medical centre for our injections. We were lined up shirts off, hand on hip, and the doctor with a large syringe went from one to the other, injecting us with the same needle. Some of the recruits literally fainted and the doctor was saying to his assistants, "catch that one". Two in our platoon alone fainted.

Training consisted mainly of drill and weapons training. We spent a lot of time on the rifle ranges learning how to shoot. These were about a quarter of a mile away, long 600yd ranges. I remember being a good shot and was awarded a 'marksman' badge. When it was raining, we went into a big shed which was on the edge of the huge parade ground to continue weapons training there.

I can also remember going into the gas chamber. We went in with our gas masks on then a gas cartridge was set off and we were made to run around a bit, before taking our gas masks off. We would then be overcome with the gas before the NCOs opened the door to let us out, by which time nose and mouth and everything was streaming. It took a bit of time to recover. I think some of the NCOs took great pleasure in keeping on their own gas respirators, so the recruits got a real good dose and the NCOs didn't. The purpose of this was to teach us how to fit the masks and demonstrate to us that they worked.

During our training for one week we were directed to agricultural work which consisted of helping the local farmer to collect his potatoes. It proved to be back breaking work.

After the six weeks training at the end of 1947, we went onto Continuation Infantry Training at a little place called Tinkers Green near Oswestry. This was for a further six weeks. One incident I do recall was that one of our intake was a great bruiser and he would try to boss everybody around. He was a genuinely nasty chap and went out boozing to extreme when we were allowed out. He would come back in the early hours of the morning and create a hell of a noise and wake everybody up. One night when he had been doing this, I yelled at him to "shut up". He came straight over to my bed and tipped the whole thing over on the

floor. So, I got up and confronted him and we had a bit of a scuffle. When he found that he wasn't getting the best of the scrap due to my long reach and boxing training at school, he went over to his bed and got his rifle (which were kept on racks behind our beds) fixed his bayonet and started charging around trying to stick me. By this time everybody had been roused including the NCOs who lived in a room alongside and he was overpowered. He was taken away and eventually court-martialled. Luckily, he never got to me with his bayonet!

The winter of 1947/1948 was a terribly cold winter and I went up to Catterick Camp in Yorkshire for Infantry Signals Training. We lived in what were called 'the Spiders' which were wooden huts each connected up in the middle to the ablutions. It was so cold that sheep used to come in at night. The only heat we had in there were small round coke stoves with a chimney going up through the roof and you put the coke in through a little flap in the top of the stove. Sheep came in because it was a bit warmer than on the outside. We only had a very small ration of coke for each barrack room. It was tiny and wasn't enough. Just enough to light the stoves and then they would go out. To try to get around this we used to foray at night and raid the coal stores in the Officers' Mess and Sergeants' Mess and pinch some of their coal to try to keep warm. They got wise to this and stopped us by painting the edges of their coal bunkers white so they could spot if any was missing.

Our intake was one of the last ones in our part of the Catterick Camp because much of the camp was closing down. The effect of this winding down was that there were night guard duties to be done with less and less personnel to do these duties. So, in the end we had to do more and more duty until we were on guard duty once every three nights.

Part of our Signals Training involved riding motorbikes. We had '18 sets' which were wartime radio sets that you wore on your back and we went off into the hills on our motorcycles to practice our radio training. We were stationed at Catterick for six weeks.

Officer Training

From there I was asked if I would like to try for officer training, so I thought there was nothing to lose. There were tests and interviews which I passed and was sent to OCTU – the National Service Officer Training Centre near York. It was a beautiful old manor house, owned by Lord somebody. We were barracked in the grounds in wooden spider huts again. I was only there for a short time when I was asked if I would like to try for Sandhurst. So again, I thought I would have a go. I went down with a couple of others to a testing place somewhere in Wiltshire run by an old General who was a dear old chap. I passed and was selected to go to Sandhurst. It was made clear to us that we could leave at any time during the first six months if we didn't fit and would then continue the remainder of our National Service elsewhere.

So, I went to Sandhurst at Camberley, and was consigned to Burma Company in New College. The study and training there was a bit like university on steroids! We studied a wide range of subjects from accounting to history with everything in between, as well as military training. I did nearly two years' training there.

My sport there was long distance running and I ran for Sandhurst against other institutions. I well recall our 'Passing Out Parade' and marching up the steps into the Old College following the Adjutant on his white charger. That evening we had the 'Passing Out Ball'. All of us in full dress uniform and the ladies in ballgowns. My parents and my girlfriend, Sheila (who later became my wife) were there.

I left Sandhurst in 1950 and was commissioned into the South Staffordshire Regiment which at that time was stationed in Hong Kong.

Journey to Hong Kong

Right at the end of 1950, the two of us from Sandhurst who had been commissioned into the South Staffordshire Regiment boarded a ship, HMS *Devonshire*, at Liverpool and looked forward to setting sail for Hong Kong, especially reaching the 12mile limit so we could get drink and cigarettes without tax. In fact, the cost without tax was next to nothing. But when we left Liverpool, the sea was so rough that we were immediately seasick which continued for the next ten days all the way through the Bay of Biscay. We didn't settle down until we got past Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean, where it calmed down and at least we could enjoy a drink and cigarettes.

The ship called in at Malta for fuel, water and supplies and sailed onto Alexandria, Egypt, where we disembarked. We were surrounded by hawkers on the dock and one sold us a small bottle of 'Spanish Fly', reputed to be an aphrodisiac. When we got back to the ship, we fed this in the milk to the ship's cat which spent all night meowing! We also visited a most beautiful Catholic cathedral in Alexandria with beautiful stonework and blue stained-glass windows which bathed everywhere in cool blue light.

From Alexandria we got back on board and travelled along the Suez Canal. The journey along the Canal was extremely hot. So hot that there was no fresh air below in the Troop Decks, where the troops slept. It was unbearable for them. The only air conditioning came from the big scoops on the deck which channelled any wind down below. It got so hot that we had to ask the Captain as soon as he got to the great lakes, which are in middle of the Canal, to turn the ship around into the wind. Later that night he turned around again and continued sailing down to the bottom part of the Suez Canal and into the Red Sea.

We stopped at Aden to take on stores and stretch our legs on the dockside but were not allowed further as there were rebels fighting in Aden Old City (at that time a chap who was with me in Sandhurst was captured and killed by the rebels in the Old City). From there we sailed into the Arabian Sea and on into the Indian Ocean. We stopped at Colombo in Ceylon (Sri Lanka now). Two of us took a trip to a pineapple canning factory and were given two of the largest pineapples we had ever seen. That evening in our cabins we ate a whole pineapple each not realising what so much in one go would do. The acid left us with sore mouths for 24hrs!

The next stop was Singapore where most of the passengers left the ship. We were there for quite a while and so a fellow officer and I went to the Raffles Hotel for one of their famous

teas and to the Botanical Gardens which were beautiful. I remember the lake in the gardens being full of carp and the water boiled with carp when bread was thrown in.

The ship's Adjutant disembarked with most troops, leaving only those troops destined for Hong Kong, so I was made ship's Adjutant. I was tasked by the ship's Captain to interview the wife of a Colonel who was a passenger on the ship and had delayed its departure by arriving back late, having been on shore. She had been told to arrive back on-board by 15.00hrs which was the allotted time for the ship to depart Singapore. She eventually arrived back two hours later, and the ship's captain was not amused. Her reason was that despite being married to a senior serving officer she had never learned the 24hr clock and therefore had associated 15.00hrs as being 5pm and had therefore arrived back two hours late!

Hong Kong and the South Staffordshire Regiment

Back on-board ship we sailed directly to Hong Kong, where we disembarked. Two of us, both Subalterns, went up to the South Staffordshire Regiment Camp, which was in the New Territories, only about 2miles from the Hong Kong/China border. Our camp was under construction at the time and we were living in big tents called 'EPIPs'. These tents normally took about six people but, in our case, it was just two officers.

One afternoon we were in the tent and a Chinese man came in with a hoe type of implement and started digging up the floor. We watched and asked him what he was doing. Of course, he didn't speak English and we couldn't speak Chinese. He went down about 6inches into the ground and dug up a coffin. He took the top off the coffin which had a skeleton in it. How long it had been there we didn't know but all that remained was the skeleton with a trilby hat on its skull. He proceeded to take all the bones out and placed them in a large earthenware pot called a 'chatty pot'. He then took the 'chatty pot' away with him. You could see these pots stashed all the way along the hillsides, which were in fact, Chinese cemeteries.

I was a platoon commander in Hong Kong and my job was to train my 30 men. I remember I had my 21st birthday there and I hired a very large American car to take us junior officers into Hong Kong for my birthday bash. We had a great time but when we were coming back, the police picked up on us and clocked that I was driving over 60mph but apparently, they couldn't follow us for some reason. The next day the police came into camp and spotted the big American car standing outside the Officers' Mess. They spoke to me and I was duly cautioned. Shortly after I was called into see my Adjutant, who gave me seven extra orderly officer's duties for getting caught!

One of our tasks was to accompany police patrols on the border because there was a lot of smuggling going on, especially petrol smuggling. Two-gallon biscuit tins containing petrol would be smuggled across into China. On one patrol we came across a bunch of smugglers who rapidly ran off, leaving their petrol cans behind. We collected all the petrol tins and took them back to camp. Whilst I was in Hong Kong, I had a BSA motorbike and I was able to fuel the motorbike from those petrol cans for the remainder of my time in Hong Kong!

One sport we did do in Hong Kong was running up and down the mountains. This was called 'Cud' climbing. It was very competitive and all the units in Hong Kong took part. But it could be quite dangerous especially coming down steep hills at breakneck speed resulting in many falls and injuries. No team ever managed to beat the Gurkhas; little, tough, wiry men and great soldiers.

Part of our training there was to dig defensive emplacements lined with corrugated iron along the border to defend it if the Chinese came over. But what happened was that the Chinese civilians would come at night when we weren't there and steal the corrugated iron! We got around this by putting holes in the sheeting, so it was no use for them.

Whilst in Hong Kong two of us Subalterns took a leave cruise to Japan. These cruises were on cargo ships that had a couple of cabins for tourists. We went from Hong Kong to Japan and called in at Osaka. Here we met a couple of Americans who were part of the Occupation Forces. They invited us to their Officers' Club and warned us to wear uniforms (which they had to do the whole time). We turned up in our smart service dress uniforms to be greeted in the foyer by a Sergeant seated at a desk. He looked at us and said "Hey, you guys, recruits ain't allowed in here". Luckily, our hosts arrived and took us inside. Loud music, officers lounging around in short sleeves being served by lovely looking Japanese waitresses. It was deadly boring (apart from the latter). We had a couple of drinks and made our excuses! Later the ship sailed onto Nagoya and then back to Hong Kong. We found the Japanese very polite and helpful.

Return to the UK

In 1951 I left Hong Kong and returned to the UK to do a series of infantry training courses at Warminster and Hythe. Warminster was the Platoon Commander Long Course and Hythe was the Small Arms Training Course, which was on the huge shingle beach between Hythe town and the sea and consisted of many ranges. After these courses, I was posted as the Depot Training Subaltern, South Staffordshire Regiment, Whittington Barracks, yet again! One of the first chaps I saw as I went through the gates was the Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM). He looked at me and I looked at him and he said "Latham?", I replied "Yes RSM I'm now Lieutenant Latham". We always got on well.

My job was training recruits for the South Staffordshire Regiment, and life was spent getting them fit, teaching them drills, handling of small arms with a lot of the time spent on the rifle ranges. The Officers' Mess was a lovely building on the edge of the barracks and my room was at the top of the stairs.

Our Adjutant at that time was a very tough, rugby playing South African by the name of De Villiers and he had a bull terrier which he had taken from a friend of his, who couldn't control it. The dog bit him on the first day and they had a falling out. Thereafter it adored De Villiers but the problem was that the dog took a dislike to me. At lunchtimes it used to wait for me behind the swing doors leading into the marble hall. I would rush through and up the stairs two at a time with the snarling dog close on my heels, into my room, slam the door, draw my sword, and open the door. As soon as the dog saw the sword it took off along the

corridor, down the back stairs to hide in the back regions. This became a regular occurrence. The dog never caught me, and I never caught the dog!

Transfer to the RAOC

Around this time the Army was shrinking, and regiments were being disbanded. A friend of mine and I could see the writing on the wall, and I was asked if I would like to transfer to the Royal Army Ordnance Corp (RAOC). I agreed and was transferred in early 1953. I then was sent on two long RAOC courses the first being 'procurement' of military stores and the second the 'long vehicle course'. Both took place in Aldershot in the ROAC depot there. After completing these courses, I was posted to the RAOC Depot at Bicester. My first job there was to supervise the transfer of stock levels to punch cards which were put onto the new computer being built at RAOC Chilwell, Nottingham. I got married end of 1952. In those days officers were not entitled to married quarters until they were twenty-five years old. I was twenty-four so had to find some civilian digs. I eventually found some in the old manor house at Tingewick near Bicester. This was a rather threadbare old manor owned by Lady Keyes, the wife of Admiral Sir Roger Keyes of the Battle of Jutland fame and the mother of Jeffrey Keyes (VC) who had died in 1941 whilst trying to snatch Rommel in the Libyan desert. She was a dear old lady who dressed in the most shabby clothes. On one occasion she invited us to accompany her to the 'Bicester Hunt Ball'. She appeared in a beautiful black flowing evening dress and dripping with fabulous jewellery. When we got back, still dressed in all her finery, she put on her old trilby hat and with a torch went out to the chickens to collect the eggs!

From Bicester I was posted to the OCTU at Aldershot as Training Subaltern and as the RAOC representative. I recall one frightening episode. We were training the cadets in live hand grenade throwing. It was one to one supervision. The cadet I was supervising pulled the pin out, but instead of throwing it out of the bunker he dropped it. I had to push him out of the way, pick up the grenade, and throw it out before it exploded! My first son, Andrew, was born in 1953.

Back to Hong Kong

After OCTU I was posted again to Hong Kong and we sailed out on the old HMS *Oxfordshire*. In Hong Kong, my job was as Staff Officer Vehicles and commanding the small vehicles depot. At that time, we were supplying vehicles to the units in Hong Kong and to the brigades fighting in Korea. I had been promoted to Captain by this time. My second son, Robert, was born in the British Military Hospital in Hong Kong. We lived in a block of flats in Kowloon and were beautifully looked after by two *ahmas* (*ahma* refers to a girl or woman employed by a family to clean, look after children, and perform other domestic tasks). I was very lucky to get in a lot of fishing which has always been a passion of mine. We would go out fishing in *sampans* both in Hong Kong harbour and in the estuary of the Pearl River. The fishing was very good indeed. We used huge prawns as bait (costing one HK Dollar each). The *sampan* lady at the back of the boat fried up the leftovers in oil and tomato juice, and they were absolutely beautiful. The *ahmas* loved it when we came back from fishing because they knew that we would be bringing lots of fish back for them.

Cambridge

We flew back from Hong Kong and I was posted to a vehicle depot in Cambridge for around one year. This depot stored what were known as 'A' vehicles; that is tanks and armoured cars, scout cars, left over from the war. Our job was to take these vehicles out of storage once a year and together with the REME get them running, before returning them back to storage. Eventually they were all sold to a firm called Kings of Cambridge who made a fortune out of the scrap steel. The Americans had manufactured Bren gun carriers for us during the war and some of these were all boxed up in the depot. Kings of Cambridge bought rows of them for £50 per box. Powered by Ford V8 engines (which by themselves were worth a lot of money), were complete-running vehicles but were also scrapped.

Our unit's living quarters whilst in Cambridge were in nearby Royston. We had our caravan towed to Royston and lived in it on a chicken farm. We didn't need an alarm clock in the morning for at about 4.30am they would all start crowing.

My next posting was to the headquarters of the vehicle organisation, which was at the Ordnance Depot in Chilwell, Nottingham, and by this time I had been promoted to Major.

Kenya

From Chilwell I was posted to Kenya to work for Joseph Kenyatta, Prime Minister of Kenya, as part of the British Army Training Team, and served as a staff officer on his staff. I met him on many occasions and during my time there one of our jobs was to design new army uniforms for the Kenyan Army which were then made in the UK. Another of my jobs was procuring vehicles from the UK for the Kenyan Army. We found that we could not source any water tank bowzers. These were very important as it was so hot for the Kenyan Army soldiers who at that time were engaged in the Shifta War (63-67). To get around this, I designed water tanks which slid on and off the backs of ordinary three tonners. These were also used by the Kenyan Air Force and the Kenyan Navy down in Mombasa. They could also be used as fire engines with the addition of a powerful water pump.

The Shifta would mine the tracks to blow up the vehicles of the Kenyan army. To get around this the Kenyan Army captured Shifta combatants and bound them to the front of their vehicles so if the vehicle drove anywhere near a mine they would yell out. The mine would then be safely decommissioned.

Kenya was a lovely posting and the work was most satisfying. We got about quite a bit. I recall flying around Mount Kenya at 18,000ft with the Kenyan Air Force and journeys right up to the north west of Kenya and wonderful holidays in Mombasa, fishing for tuna and relaxing at the leave centre there. I also remember being threatened by an elephant when we were travelling down the road to Mombasa. Scary! On occasions we went into the Rift Valley and hired permanent tents on the shore of Lake Naivasha. We fished by day and by night sat around a huge log fire with a drink and watching all the eyes gleaming in the reflection from the fire and listening to the grunts of the hippos. Wonderful! I also remember looking for rock hyrax (a medium-sized mammal native to Africa and the Middle East) in the Rift Valley. We saw the hyrax but suddenly we got a very strong and distinct

smell of lion. We made a fast exit back to the car! Before we left Kenya, I had trained up my African replacement and he took over from me.

After Kenya I had a series of postings. Initially I was posted back to the UK to the headquarters of the vehicle organisation at the big Ordnance Depot at Chilwell, Nottingham. I used to visit all our different vehicle depots and I remember a visit to the Vehicle Depot at Lugershall, Wiltshire, where I was taught to drive tanks. I think the one I trained on was a 'Centurion'. I was then posted to Germany.

Germany

My posting to Germany became the highlight of my career. This was to 2 Division in Germany to command one of the two Ordnance Field Parks (OFPs). Not many officers get to command a unit. My OFP was stationed at Osnabruck in a beautiful old German barracks on a hill. The OFP held the first reserve of stores for 12 Brigade.

As well as the Brigade and Divisional exercises we used to train by taking out the whole of the OFP which consisted of about 20 or 25 vehicles for our own exercises. I found a farmer some 20miles away who allowed us to deploy the OFP in one of his woods. After I was satisfied with the layout and camouflage of the vehicles we would step down to non-operational, and the chaps would go to the nearest village for a bit of a binge. I was invited to the farmer's house for a drink and I would present him with some of the brandy which he was rather partial to called De Roche brandy, which I bought very cheaply from the NAAFI. In response he gave us a complete deer which he had shot in the woods for us. This was taken back to the cook house and went into the general diet for the OFP. At the end of my service in the OFP and for my previous experience in administration I was awarded an AMBIM (Associate Member of the British Institute of Management).

My next posting was as a Staff Officer on CRAOC's staff of 2 Division at Lubeka (see photo). From there I went to the headquarters of the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) at Rheindahlen, again as a Staff Officer, at the ROAC headquarters (see photo).

We were fortunate to live in very big married quarters. It was a huge house with four bedrooms and was on the edge of a wood. The garden was very bare indeed so the first week my wife and I went over the border into Holland to the market and bought lots of flowers, which we planted that day. The next morning, we went out and they had all gone, having all been eaten by rabbits, which led us to understand why the previous owner had not done much gardening!

Whilst serving in Rheindahlen a big new Army Forces children's school was being set-up. My wife, Sheila, was very much involved in this and when it opened, she was appointed school secretary. A busy job. So much so that she herself had an assistant to help her and do her typing. Sheila stayed at the school until we left Germany.

During our time in Germany the Cold War was in process and Berlin was surrounded by Russian controlled territory. The British Sector in Berlin was connected to the West by a single, highly controlled, road. We had a leave centre in Berlin, a very nice hotel. We took

advantage of this and I took the family to Berlin. We went by car, stopped at the guard post to the controlled road, signed in by very smart Russian soldiers in tailored uniforms. I was saluted, but embarrassingly for me, was not allowed to acknowledge their salute. It was something to do with 'recognition'. We toured Berlin's West Sector, saw the Berlin Wall and took the children to the wonderful zoo in West Berlin. We also had a very controlled tour of the Russian Sector. We passed through Checkpoint Charlie and we had a very good view of the much-chipped Brandenburg Gate amongst many other sights. I remember how clean and smart were the areas we were permitted to see. Interesting.

Back to the UK

I was next posted to the very large Ordnance Ammunition Depot at Kineton, which was located on the site of the 1642 Battle of Edgehill. I was Officer Commanding Troops. The soldiers were all ammunition experts who looked after ammunition for issuing world-wide. My next posting was back again to the Ordnance Depot in Chilwell, as a Major commanding one of the sub-depots, staffed by civilians and a few soldiers. Around this time my wife and I bought our own house at Long Eaton, near Chilwell. It was a beautiful Edwardian House once owned by one of the big tobacco families in Nottingham.

My final posting was to the Central Ordnance Depot (COD) at Donnington in Shropshire. I was promoted to Lt Colonel as the depot Chief Administration Officer and at this time we sold our house in Long Eaton and bought an old farmhouse in Wales, on the banks of the River Dyfi Estuary, near Machynlleth. For two years I commuted to Wales on all possible weekends, until I retired in 1981.

Retirement

Before leaving the Army, I undertook a six-week retirement course at an agricultural college in the South. One thing that course taught me was never to be a farmer! After forty-two years we still live at our farm along the bank of the Dyfi Estuary and have been really settled here in beautiful Wales. Especially enjoying the fishing on our doorstep and in Cardigan Bay, off Aberystwyth!