

# A Terrier's Tale and Memories

By Major (Retired) J T Aitken TD, FRICS, MRAC

It was on a cold, wet and windy November Sunday morning in 2008 that I was paying my respects in front of my 42-inch plasma screen television instead of attending the War Memorial at Irongray Kirk War Memorial; it was far too wet and cold to be outside in such conditions at my age of 73. However, as usual, I was proudly wearing my Army Veteran's Badge and my Territorial Decoration (TD) medal whilst viewing the service and parade at the Cenotaph and was remembering the fallen in the two World Wars of 1914/18 and 1939/45. This year was more poignant than the many previous attendances I had made at various other War Memorials over the years. For one reason or another, it got me even more seriously remembering and thinking about all those who had gone before and had made the ultimate sacrifice for all of us.

But in addition, this year being the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the First World War and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of Territorial Army, my mind started to focus on those conscripted and volunteer survivors who have come to the assistance of their country in its time of need. In particular, I was mainly thinking of those who were known to me throughout my Military Service and who hailed from Irongray Parish, the Royal Burgh of Dumfries and generally throughout Dumfries and Galloway. They were the lucky ones who had survived all the conflicts and 'cold wars' that had taken place over the previous 100 years. But even they were becoming fewer and fewer as was evidenced by the decrease in numbers at the annual turnouts at the various Armistice Parades held in the region during 2008.

My wife's father, the late Robert Sherry who was originally from Shawhead but latterly lived at Cargenbridge, Dumfries, was a survivor of the Great War. He had been invalided out, having been seriously injured at the second battle of the Somme, even though he had survived the first battle of the Somme. He was indeed one of the lucky ones. Along with many others from Dumfries and Galloway area, when the call went out, he had volunteered to join the local battalion of the Kings' Own Scottish Borderers at the Drill Hall in Newell Terrace, Dumfries in 1914. My father-in-law didn't talk much about his experiences during the war since I think he felt them to be too painful. However, he would occasionally recount some aspects of life in the trenches and it wasn't a pretty picture that he painted. They didn't make the supreme sacrifice with their lives but made a similarly great sacrifice for which we should all be eternally grateful.

I was able to remember the second world war of 1939/45 survivors more vividly. Maybe

that was because I was one of those myself. Although aged five at the beginning of the war and aged ten at the end of the war in 1945, my memories are still clear about many aspects. I had a number of uncles and cousins who were "called up". And on my wife's side of the family, her elder sister Jean Sherry and her oldest brother Norman Sherry, both from the Bushcroft area near Terregles, served their King



and country. My uncle Jimmy Aitken was not so lucky during that conflict since he died whilst he was skipper of a Boom Defence Vessel at Scappa Flow during 1944. I can remember his burial with full military naval honours.

In more recent times, my eldest son Gavin Aitken (left) served for 22 years as a sub-mariner in the Royal Navy, attaining the rank of Chief Petty Officer. Educated at Dumfries Academy, he participated in the Falklands War and many aspects of the Cold War years. With regard to myself (above right), I served as a volunteer in the Territorial Army for 22 years, firstly with the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion Kings' Own Scottish Borderers (TA), then the amalgamated 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion Kings' Own Scottish Borderers (TA). Latterly I served with the then Royal Army Ordnance Corps (now the Royal Logistics Corps). I retired in 1982 with the rank of Major and I was lucky enough not to be involved in any of the more recent conflicts, except of course, for the many aspects of the Cold War Years.

It is apparent to-day that very few of the younger generation were present at the various remembrance services and ceremonies and this made me rather sad to think that the general population were failing to recognize those sacrifices made, not only by the fallen, but by survivors of the two World Wars and other more recent conflicts.

But I couldn't understand why this lethargy should exist and why so few of the younger generation were failing to recognize what previous and existing generations had done during those many dark days so that we could enjoy life, freedom and the standard of living that exists at the present day. Was it that they could not remember those far off days? Was it that they did not know previous members of their families had made supreme sacrifices? Were they now more concerned with present day problems like the credit crunch or global warming? Why was support from some quarters for our brave lads in the military services diminishing? Do they not accept that there is a present day threat from Terrorism? Could it be that the Government is at fault for reducing the numbers in our military forces or that they decided to disband famous local Regiments, including our own The Kings' Own Scottish Borderers? Do they not understand how the Cold War came to an end with the World now being a safer place?

I really just do not understand the present day attitude. If it is because of ignorance, then there is little that I can do to change that attitude fully. But I will tender my own "tuppence worth" of my memories and experiences since moving to Dumfries and Galloway to work in the late 1950s and I sincerely hope that it will inspire future generations to continue or regenerate their support both now and in the future, for our Nation in particular and the World in general. As General Kitchener stated on posters at the start of the First World War, and it is as pertinent to day, "Your Country Needs YOU".

My Military Service had always been with the Territorial Army, which as I have already stated, has its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. I have read many articles and books in recent years starting with "*I joined the TA at the local Drill Hall in 1938.....*" or in some instances with earlier articles, would read "*I joined the TA in 1914*". This indeed happened to me in 1958 when, on the suggestion of my employer (then Lt Col CG Grieve TD FLAS of Lockerbie), I enlisted in the 5<sup>th</sup> (Dumfries and Galloway) Battalion, The Kings' Own Scottish Borderers (TA) at the Drill Hall in Newall Terrace. Little did I know that I would serve 22 years in this voluntary service to our nation.



The above photograph of the Officers Mess of the 4/5 Battalion Kings' Own Scottish Borderers taken at Annual Camp in 1963 shows a number of Dumfries and Galloway men – Lt Col Sir William Jardine of Applegarth, the Officer Commanding the recently formed unit, is seated in the front row (fifth from the left) along with Major Ian Drape from Whithorn seated third from the right and the Padre, Major Keith Angus from Hoddum extreme right. In the middle row is the Medical Officer Major Bob Keir from Dumfries (second from left), Capt Michael Oakshot from Castle Douglas (fifth from the left) and Capt Willie Turner from Dumfries (sixth from the left). The paymaster for the unit Capt Alex Brown from Lockerbie is second from the right with Capt (QM) Len Donald from Dumfries (extreme right). Located in the back row, second from the left is the author Captain Jim Aitken from Dumfries and on the extreme right Major George Harvie from Dalbeattie.

To day, the Territorial Army (TA) is an essential part of the British Army, comprising a quarter of its personnel. It provides everyday people with the chance to do something different with their lives – an opportunity to face challenges, develop new skills, meet new people, have lots of fun, provide a wonderful service to our nation and, to top it all off, earn some extra money. It receives full government backing and provides a very economical addition to and support for the Regular Army.

Established formerly in 1907 by Army reformer B Haldane, the TA was at the time Britain's response to the continental concept of "a nation in arms". Originally known as the Territorial Force, people across the country were asked to give up their time to help in "homeland defence". And they did – in their thousands. Dozens of regiments were formed and in 1921, such was the gravitas placed on the volunteers, that they changed their name from a Force to an Army. So the Territorial Army was born. For a brief spell in the 1970s and early 1980s, it changed its name again, this time to the Territorial and Volunteer Reserve (TAVR) but I was particularly pleased when it subsequently reverted to the previous TA title which still maintains to the present day.

Over the years, successive Governments have increased and decreased numbers depending on policy, politics and war commitments, but the force has remained and is still a strong one today. I sincerely hope that support for the TA continues and that we will see further increases in strength, because of its proven usefulness and economic viability and also as military roles and global responsibilities add additional requirements from our existing military personnel. One Regular Officer who works with TA units said the old "Dad's Army" image of the volunteers was a thing of the past. He told BBC News Online; *"Most people join up for the challenge. We get people from a complete range of professions and trades, everything from Vicars to people earning serious money in the city. The TA is a very important part of the Army and I think it's seen as that those days"*. This has been amply shown in recent conflicts in the Iraq Gulf Wars, Bosnia and Afghanistan where a considerable number of those TA personnel Volunteers have been serving with honour and

distinction. Many will no doubt be required to serve in future theatres and conflicts if contraction of the Regular Army should continue.

The Territorial Army is, of course, an entirely voluntary military force and reflects the true traditions of volunteers throughout the annals of history and particularly in the United Kingdom. I was reminded of this fairly recently when I was asked to carry out the duties of Toasting the Lassies at our local Burns Supper. I was struggling, not being a Burns scholar, and wondering “Why me?” when I suddenly remembered that “Rabbie” had been a member of the Dumfries Volunteers and I was at one time a member of the Headquarter Company of the 5<sup>th</sup> (Dumfries and Galloway) Battalion Kings’ Own Scottish Borderers (TA) being then based at the Drill Hall, Dumfries. So from that one comparison to the Bard I was able to develop my speech to establish others, though I won’t go on to say how many; suffice to say that they appeared to go down a treat with the lassies! In spite of all the apathy amongst the general population which I have enumerated, the TA is still currently in very good heart, having a considerable strength of men and women and is organized on a nationwide basis into Specialist Units and Independent Units. *Specialist Units* are organized from a Central Volunteer Headquarters whilst *Independent Units* are organized on a more local basis. Nunfield House on Edinburgh Road, Dumfries is the local unit’s headquarters. But what makes a person join such an organization? The reasons are many and varied. Patriotism, having a sense of adventure, personal pride, self-discipline, previous military experience, comradeship and financial benefits all have a part to play. I will confine my further remarks to my own personal experiences as a member of the TA and I sincerely hope that you will find my experiences enlightening and it may even, I hope, encourage some of the younger generation to join. Remember, this is one occasion where the old Army adage “Never Volunteer” definitely does NOT apply.

It was in the early 1950s at the commencement of my civilian career that I first came into contact with the TA. One must remember that in the 1950s, the Second World War was still uppermost in most people’s minds, having only ended five years before in 1945. The son of my first employer, and who worked in the same office as I did, was a former Squadron Leader and Spitfire pilot with a distinguished war service behind him. Another of my employer’s sons had just qualified as a Chartered Surveyor and, having completed his National Service, joined a local Territorial Yeomanry unit and held the rank of Captain. I liked the idea of charging about the countryside in Ferret Scout cars at the weekend, which, coupled with my pride in local Army Regiments such as the Black Watch, the KOSB, the Argyll and Southern Highlanders and hearing the stories told by the Squadron Leader of his wartime exploits, sold me on the idea of military service.

It was not until 1958 that I joined the TA, which was after I had completed my education and obtained my professional qualifications. I had been exempt from National Service due to a severe knee injury sustained whilst playing Rugby though I subsequently had a cartilage removed and having undergone a course of extensive therapy, my knee improved to the stage when I could again play Rugby for Dumfries Rugby Club (of which I was Captain in 1964). But by this time National Service had finished. My employer, who had been watching all this carefully, noted that I was back playing Rugby and suggested that I might want to think of joining the local TA Unit, the 5<sup>th</sup> (Dumfries and Galloway) Battalion Kings’ Own Scottish Borderers of which he was Commander. He was looking for a person to be trained as a Signals Officer and thought that I would fit the bill although at that time I knew nothing about radio! However, I jumped at the chance and presented myself, like many before me, at the Drill Hall, Newall Terrace on one of the TA Drill nights to join up.

The first person I met that evening was Major Bob Keir, the unit’s Medical Officer. Bob was the Chief Anaesthetist at Dumfries and Galloway Royal Infirmary and Cresswell Maternity Hospital. Of course the purpose of his attendance was to give me a full Medical for my fitness to serve. By this time my knee problem was back to normal and, unlike the National Service Medical, I passed with flying colours! I was then interviewed and “sworn

in” by the local Company Commander of Headquarters’ Company who turned out to be Major George Thomson, a fellow Chartered Surveyor, who owned and ran the business of G M Thomson and Co of Buccleuch Street, Dumfries. George was in the Artillery during the war and saw active service in many locations including the Italian Campaign.

Thus I commenced my military career. I was immediately appointed as an “Officer Cadet” and had to serve one year in the ranks before obtaining my commission of Second Lieutenant (on probation). The local Company Sergeant Major started to put me through my paces on Drill Nights in the Drill Hall along with the other recruits till I became reasonably accomplished at ‘square bashing’, weapon handling, firing the Lea Enfield .303 rifle on the ranges, and the like. After Summer Camp that year at Thetford in Norfolk (where I was attached to the Signals Platoon and learned the rudiments of making communications without using wires), I attended the Mons Officer Cadet School near Aldershot for their two-weeks’ course. Having passed the course, I therefore gained promotion to Second Lieutenant and was posted to the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion Kings’ Own Scottish Borderers (TA) where I was appointed Signals Officer and second in command of HQ Company of the Battalion which, of course, was based in the Drill Hall at Newall Terrace Dumfries.



Members of HQ CO who won the China Cup for shooting in 1961 are shown here on the left. I have difficulty in remembering the names of the personnel in the photograph but the front row (left to right) consists of Warrant Officer Class 1 Archie Lawson, Captain Jim Aitken, Captain Alex Brown and the Company Sergeant Major (CSM). They were all from Dumfries. In the back row, the only name I can remember is that of Corporal Hector Davidson (extreme left) who for many years paraded the streets of Dumfries as the local postman. At this time, the Battalion strength

was over 1000. I can remember the 1000<sup>th</sup> recruit came from Dumfries and I accompanied him to the Border TV studios at Carlisle and we were both interviewed for the local Border News programme “Lookaround” – and it was in Black and White before the days of colour! This substantial force, based in Drill Halls throughout the Dumfries and Galloway Region, attended training sessions at their local Drill Halls on two evenings per week, various camps at the weekends and of course the Annual Summer Camps. I attended annual training camps at Thetford in Norfolk (where the filming of the TV series “Dad’s Army” took place), Barry Budden near Carnoustie, Catterick, Lochearnhead, Comrie and I even had a fortnight’s training in Malta one year. It was a very serious commitment but the compensation was training expenses paid for each training session attended and of course regular army rates of pay appropriate to rank were payable during full time training at Annual Training Camps. In addition, many also took their fortnight’s holidays to attend Camp and were therefore also paid by their employers for the period as well. But, at that time, many employers realized the importance of the TA and gave time off to attend Annual Camp (without pay of course). Finally each year there was a substantial capital sum bonus paid to those who completed their annual training commitment.

The training carried out was those applicable to an infantry battalion at that time – basic platoon tactics, weapon handling of the Lea Enfield .303 Rifle, Bren gun, small arms, the SMG and Mortars. Of course much time was spent on the ranges and all TA members became most proficient shots. The local firing range for Dumfries was at the Lochar Moss though there were others at Lockerbie and Castle Douglas. Apart from the general military training carried out applicable to an infantry battalion, I carried out specialist training in radio communications. As I previously stated, whilst an Officer Cadet at the commencement of my military career, I was assigned to the Signals Platoon of the Battalion and it was during

this time that I got the “bug” for radio communications. As a young subaltern, I was most impressed with how radio communications played such an important part in the running of the unit and the higher units via the Royal Signals rear links; how one could communicate with another person unseen and at a great distance; how easy it was to talk to that person you couldn’t see, without the aid of wires; and how secure was the system of operating – to speak to someone 80 miles away by what was then termed a Skywave Aerial was just unbelievable to me. With the help of the Platoon Staff Sergeant Billy Muir from Terregles (later Captain (QM) W Muir) and the rest of the Signals Platoon, I learnt a lot and became quite efficient at operating, maintenance of equipment, organizing the Platoon and generally providing a very efficient and trustworthy service to the Battalion. I decided there and then that, come the proper time, I would learn the full secrets of this method of communication.

Little did I know at the time that I would not get into the amateur radio hobby until 1988 when I was just about to retire from my civilian work as a Chartered Surveyor! I eventually studied for and passed the Radio Communication Agency’s examination and obtained the full UK Amateur Radio Licence with the Scottish call sign GM0HZM. I still enjoy this hobby to day and have the pleasure of talking to people all over the World.

Apart from the Signals Platoon being controlled and administered by HQ Company, so were the Military Band, Cooks, Storemen, Clerks and some members of the Pipe Band. The Military Band and the Pipe Band also doubled up as stretcher-bearers and first-aiders. The Bandmaster was well known in Dumfries – WOII Wallace Gowans whilst the Pipe Major was ‘Pipie’ Brown from Thornhill. The Cooks were led by another well known Dumfries man and former Queen of the South footballer, WOII Ben Combes. I can well remember on one momentous occasion marching behind the Military Band and the Pipes and Drums at Galashiels Rugby ground in the Borders. This was on the occasion of the presentation of new Colours by HRH The Duchess of Gloucester (the Colonel in Chief) to the recently amalgamated 4/5 Battalion Kings’ Own Scottish Borderers in 1963. I was in command of the Colour Party that day and it was a very proud moment for me as the whole Battalion of 1000 men marched on to the strains of the Regimental March “Blue Bonnets and Over the Border”.

Change was on the way, however, as the Wilson Government in 1966 decided in their wisdom that the TA was again to be re-organized. The “Ever Readies” were formed and, as a last-minute decision of the Government, a Home Defence Force was also formed. Since the “Ever Readies” commitment was very onerous and required much more of the Volunteer’s spare time, many from the Dumfries area (including myself) decided to stay on in the Home Defence Force but after a short spell of service in that, I transferred to the Reserve List. This coincided with a move from Dumfries to the Central Belt of Scotland in my civilian professional job. I thought then that this was the end of my Military career.

I was wrong, however, and on my return to Dumfries in 1970 to work in The District Valuer’s Office, I discovered the Home Defence Force no longer existed and the “Ever Ready” force was down to a single Company strength with no further vacancies for my rank at that time. However, I also discovered that a number of my colleagues had transferred to Specialist Units and a number of Dumfries men had transferred to The Royal Army Ordnance Corps, which had their Volunteer Headquarters at Deepcut in Surrey. They welcomed me with open arms and I spent the rest of my TA career with them until I retired in 1984.



RAOC Officer

Officers Mess at Fremington. Author seated on the extreme right

Thus started what I considered to be a second career in the TA and it was a most enjoyable, rewarding and fulfilling experience. The unit took advantage of my previous experience in an Infantry Battalion Officer and I was appointed OC of their Military Training Team. The commitment to training was not as onerous as the “Ever Ready” commitment, though a considerable amount of extra training time was available, should the Volunteer have sufficient time and energy to fulfil more. In addition to my role as OC the Military Training Team, I also had to be proficient at all the other tasks carried out by the Corps. The RAOC were “shopkeepers” to the Army. In other words, they provided and supplied many forms of



Logistics and Services which included vehicles, ammunition, missiles, rockets, petroleum and ration supplies. Services provided included Mobile Bath and Laundry Units. Those Logistics and Services were required at that time during the cold war years in BAOR, so my service in the Corps meant a number of training exercises were carried out in the United Kingdom, Germany and Belgium. But on a couple of occasions training was also carried out in Cyprus. Needless to say, I thoroughly enjoyed the training in Cyprus and found the local Priest, shown on the left here, made me most welcome, as did the rest of the population. My first visit to Cyprus was before the invasion and occupation by Turkey whilst the second was to the Paphos area after partition.

My main task within the Corps was with regard to the Military Training Team. I commanded the team for most of my service in the Corps. The team personnel carried out weekend training sessions at many locations throughout the United Kingdom – in Liverpool, York, Carnoustie, Milton Bridge near Edinburgh and of course at the Central Volunteer Headquarters at Deepcut in Surrey. Members of the team had their specialty and mine was as a Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Warfare instructor.

It will be appreciated that most members of the Corps were recruited from the United Kingdom but there were still a few members I came across from Dumfries and Galloway. Corporal Wattie Scott from Dumfries, Staff Sergeant Ken Thorpe from Castle Douglas and Sergeant John Hughes from Stranraer were some of the personnel I can remember.

It was in 1984 that I decided to retire from the Territorial Army. I saw those Reserve Forces develop from a large number of enthusiastic amateurs to become a much smaller, better-trained and elite professional organization comparable with any professional army of today. TA members who had satisfactorily completed 12 years service and training were recommended to receive an award. In the case of other ranks the award is the Efficiency



Medal and for Officers it is the Territorial Decoration (TD). After a further six further years' satisfactory service, a "bar" or "clasp" may additionally be awarded. The photograph above left is of the author being presented with his TD decoration and a very proud moment it was! The "clasp" to that TD was awarded some 6 years later.

Over the years I had many happy times, met many people from all walks of life and can thoroughly recommend to any young person who is contemplating a military career or wants to change his lifestyle or in fact has just retired from the Regular Army, that he or she should seriously think of joining the Reserve Forces. All will greatly benefit from the experience, way of life, activities and travel. I certainly look back on those

times with pride, joy and happiness and was delighted to be of service to my Country.