

A HAWK IN IRELAND



**A personal memoir of service in Northern Ireland
By Geoff Hutchinson**

Introduction

I was deployed as a Cold war warrior in Germany when the “troubles” in Northern Ireland began. The regiment was prepared and waiting for the iron curtain to be breached by the Warsaw Pact forces led by Russia. There was no sign of any impending thaw and the war remained icy cold. I was a Lance Corporal, Chieftain tank crewman in A Squadron 14th/20th Kings Hussars. I'd taken my medical and entrance examinations for the Army as a 14-year-old boy and in September 1964, at the age of 15 joined the Junior Leader Regiment Royal Armoured Corps.



The author on his first leave 1964

In January 1967, after 2 ½ years as a boy soldier, I joined my Regiment which had recently been deployed to Paderborn West Germany. We were equipped with Centurion Tanks but in 1968 we became the second regiment in the army to convert to the new Chieftain tank. During the late 60's and indeed well into the 80's much of our time was spent on 2 hours standby to go to, what would inevitably be, a nuclear war. We were crashed out of our barracks fairly frequently to test our readiness for war. In the 60's the Army was involved in various conflicts including Aden, Cyprus, Malaya and Borneo, meanwhile the Vietnam War was raging. However, apart from a 6-month tour as UN troops in Cyprus 1965 the regiment had not been involved in any conflicts since the Second World War.

In 1969 The Princess Anne became our Colonel in Chief, the so-called troubles began in Ulster and British troops were deployed to Belfast in aid of the civil power. The good news for the regiment was that we were to convert to the Armoured Reconnaissance role with A and B Squadrons to be posted to Singapore and Hong Kong respectively. I was to get my knees brown in the Far East. RHQ, C and HQ Squadrons were posted to Tidworth and it was from there in 1970 that C Squadron carried out the Regiment's first emergency deployment to Belfast.



Cold war warrior, Centurion tank gunner

Singapore was everything we expected it to be and we loved it. We were deployed as the Armoured Reconnaissance Squadron attached to the Commando Brigade. The Malayan and Borneo crisis was still a recent memory so we spent a lot of time showing the flag in Malaya and Singapore. We worked and played hard but lived with the trappings of a Colonial past. This included dhoby whallas, char whallas, boot boys and cleaners, we even had someone to cut our nails and squeeze our blackheads. We purchased and wore tailor made suits, shirts and shoes; in fact we were probably the best-dressed drunks in the British army. In the end B Squadron could probably claim that honour with their more prolonged stay in Hong Kong. Sadly all good things had to come to an end and ours did significantly earlier than we expected. Our two-year tour in Singapore was cut to one year and we were warned that we were to return to Tidworth from where we would be deployed to Northern Ireland. So in 1971 we went from Singapore via Tidworth to County Armagh, the flesh pots of the Far East to the bogs of the Irish border.



Malaya 1970

This is not meant to be a definitive history of the Regiment in Ireland rather it's a very personal memoir, seen through the mists of time. The details are how I remember them and may not correspond with other people's memories. Although the tours are in chronological order the events probably aren't and I'm sure that if anyone else reads this they may remember things differently. I have read the Hawk magazines covering this period and find it amazing how little mention there is about the tours the regiment carried out. What is mention tends to be light hearted and thin in detail. There are some exception of course, the obituaries for the 6 lads we lost over there but even they are remarkably thin. A Squadrons did produce magazines covering the 1972 tour and the 1978 tour had a Regimental magazine with a little more detail, but still quite lightweight. There are also good summaries of events to be found in chapter 13 of The Ramnugger Boys written by John Pharo-Tomlin and in The Hawks written by Bryan Perrett.

It is staggering to know that in our own country in the region of 1000 British soldiers and in some cases their families were killed as a result of the "troubles". Be that in Northern Ireland, bases in the UK or on the Continent, performing public duties or in the pubs they frequented and in one case while travelling by coach with their families. It's shocking and sadly, hardly remembered these few years later.

Geoff Hutchinson 2014

Tour 1

1971 Gosford Castle, Market Hill, County Armagh

Looking back, "A" Squadron deployed, remembering that this was the third year of the conflict, with a naivety that in hindsight is amazing. We had 4 weeks pre-tour training during which time we also helped run the Tidworth tattoo and horse trials. How things would change as this undeclared war progressed and as we grew to realise the seriousness of the conflict! The Squadron was equipped with Ferret scout cars, Saladin armoured cars and Saracen armoured personnel carriers. We drove from Tidworth to Liverpool and embarked on a Belfast Steam Ship car ferry for Belfast, from there we deployed down to Gosford castle, a Victorian folly just outside Market Hill, county Armagh. The Castle was still a "tourist attraction" and looked imposing from the outside but was damp and crumbling on the inside. It had one redeeming feature a civilian café in the basement with good-looking waitresses serving decent snacks. We shared the castle with a Royal Engineer squadron whom, for whatever reason, hated the cavalry.



Our troop mounted ready to move

Before long we had the first incident highlighting the dangers of service in Ireland, unfortunately it was self-inflicted. An Engineer patrol on returning to the castle was going through their unloading drills when one of their members negligently discharge his rifle. The bullet hit and killed one of their own men who at the time was making a phone call home. The phone box was to the rear of the unloading bay and from then on whenever I used it I kept my head down and a very wary eye out for anyone unloading their weapons outside the window.

Facilities in the castle where basic, toilets where buckets placed under a plank with holes in to sit on, the only privacy being a low hessian screen between seats. Latrine emptying was a job to be avoided, the waste was taken away in a sludge gulper truck, but someone had to carry the buckets out to be emptied and then give them a quick rinse.

Washing was done under a corrugated iron lean to with cold water taps over galvanised troughs, showers were in an unheated tent supplied by a mobile bath unit. Hot water for washing was supplied via "Queen Mary" boilers fuelled by coal; it was the guard's job to ensure they were lit and hot water available in time for reveille. They were also responsible for re-fuelling the generators that supplied the electricity to the castle, whoa betide if they ran out and power was cut or if no hot water was available. Eventually the boilers that were coal fired were upgraded to LPG, that made them easy to light but it came with a problem, the wind kept blowing the flames out. Some unsuspecting soldier would then come along to light them, unaware of a gas build up, they'd strike a match and they'd explode. Some of the lads sustained burns as a result of these explosions though none too seriously.



Al Beveridge going to the washroom Gosford style

The Squadron Sergeant Major, Jock Kerr ex RSDG, convinced himself that these people were malingers and burning themselves deliberately to avoid going out on patrols. So he decided to give a demonstration on how to light a boiler. Now, he was not the most liked of men and he decided to paraded the Squadron, some of whom, including me, had been working all night and had just gone to bed, to give them the demonstration. The scene was set, boiler in position, but I suspect that before he arrived someone turned the gas on for a while causing a build up. The Sergeant Major, having berated us for negligence, made great play of making a long taper out of newspaper he lit it, turned on the gas, went to light the ring and boom! You can imagine his horror when it exploded singeing his arm up to the elbow. What was worse, however, was the Squadron on parade, trying their best not to laugh out loud, looking anywhere but at him, their eyes shut to contain the tears and shoulder bobbing in suppressed laughter. He spent the next week or so his arm swathed in bandages threatening anyone who dared glance at him with the least look of amusement on their faces.

Most of our time was spent on mobile patrols and escorts around county Armagh and often further afield. One regular task was to escort commercial explosives in transit from the South of Ireland to the North, we'd pick them up on the border at Kileen Customs and escort them through the Province to the outskirts of Belfast. This involved a troop meeting a truck loaded with approximately 1 ton of high explosives and

escorting it safely to its destination. Obviously these deliveries were a prime target for any terrorist organisation and it was either the bravest or most stupid of people in Ireland who drove the trucks. They would drive like lunatics from the border to the outskirts of Belfast refusing to stop for anything or anybody; we would do our best to keep up. The inevitable happened with top heavy, speeding armoured cars, my troop leader rolled his Saladin on a bend near Belfast. The only thing that stopped it turning completely turtle was the commander's machine gun mounting. The radio operator (Jock Beauchamp?) was down in the turret making a brew, otherwise he almost certainly would have been crushed. Fortunately no one was hurt, the explosives were delivered successfully and we became the butt of many jokes from our recovery crew.



How not to park a Saladin

Our patrol pattern tended to be 16 hour day patrols 0600-2200 hrs and 8 hour night patrols 2200-0600hrs this ensured we had at least 1 troop down on the border 24-7. Those timings did not include the drive to and from the patrol area that could take 45minutes to an hour. If I remember correctly we would do 3 day patrols followed by 3 night patrols and then 1 day on maintenance and guarding at the castle. Due to the deteriorating situation C Squadron joined us for their second emergency tour and took over the western part of our area of responsibility.

One of the problems encountered when patrolling the border is that it is poorly marked and has hundreds of unofficial crossing points, this inevitably caused problems. On one such patrol accompanied by my pal Ron Flowers I strayed over the border into Southern Ireland. Ron had joined the troop on a temporary basis and the 2 of us in Ferret Scout cars were patrolling the border near Forkhill. I took great pride in getting as close to the border as possible and my operating procedure was to lead, knowing roughly where I was going, while keeping an eye out for IED's and ambushes. I'd asked Ron in the second car to keep a closer eye on the map to ensure we stayed on the right side of the border. The idea being that he should stop me if we were in danger of going south. I should have known something was wrong when we started getting strange looks off the locals we passed, then we came to a road junction with a road sign with place names written in Gaelic, we were well south of the border. We beat a hasty retreat north and to this day Ron says he thought that I knew where I was going, so did I, clearly we didn't.

These simple errors could and did later have fatal consequences. C Squadron had two serious incidents down on the border that are worth noting. Pete Webb was caught in an IRA ambush, a bolt from an IED smashed his lower jaw and he came under sustained small arms fire. Pete, even though he was seriously wounded, engaged the enemy until his Browning machine gun ammunition ran out, he was then reputed to have carried on firing with his Sterling sub machine gun, he awarded the Military Medal for his bravery. I got to know Pete quite well and I was told that his jaw was rebuilt using bone grafted from his ribs. He was a tough ex RAC Para but some would say that he was never the same after the incident.

Chris Tottman commanded another patrol that was ambushed. Sadly on this occasion Ian Armstrong was killed and Ron Agar his driver wounded. My understanding is that it was either on or just over the border and that the locals had used the coil of barbed wire we all carried on the rear of our Ferrets to jam their steering. They'd dismounted to try and clear it when they came under heavy small arms fire. Chris was awarded a mention in despatches for his handling of the situation while Barney McVay and one of the Elsdon twins Chris or Pete were awarded the GOC's commendation for their part in recovering Jeff's body and rescuing the wounded.



Ron and me on the day of our incursion into the South

Around that time we were given the job of marking the unofficial border crossing points with yellow painted squares rather like box junctions, I believe this was to help stop our incursions into the south. Later we went one stage further and with the help of the Engineers started cratering the unofficial crossing points with explosives, this had little or no long-term success, but the bangs were satisfying. Cratering was very unpopular with the locals as these were well-used crossings. Some farmers for example had land north and south of the border and it was the road through their land. However, it made life for a while, a little inconvenient for smugglers and gunrunners. In the end it didn't take long for the locals to fill the craters in or make diversions through adjoining fields. The border was fast becoming a very dangerous place and in years to come too dangerous for road transport, eventually the majority of movement was by foot or chopper.

As the tour continued the security situation got steadily worse and the Stormont Government decided to implement Internment without trial. This hugely controversial decision really set the cat among the pigeons. It was late on Sunday evening when we were briefed that in the early hours of the following morning internment would come into effect. I instinctively felt very uneasy about it, it went against my core beliefs that we should not be imprisoning people without a trial, it was wrong and I believe proved to be wrong. But the order was legal and my job as a soldier was to obey legal orders, which I did.

"Chivers" Whitehead and I were detailed to arrest a man called John Rogers who lived on Sugar Island in Newry. We were to be the muscle on this operation, Chivers was my driver and both of us were over 6ft tall rugby players, which probably influenced the decision to use us. Our party was to consist of 2 officers, 1 in charge of the party and 1 to make the arrest. We were to travel in one of Assault troop's Saracens complete with a driver, commander and escort, the arrest was to be made in the early hours of the following morning. We were briefed that Rogers lived in a ground floor flat, that we were to gain entry, make the arrest and take him to the local military base in Newry.

We arrived at the address in the early hours, and Mr Williams-Wynn, the officer in charge gave 3 loud knocks on the external door to the block of flats, there was no answer so he turned to me and said "kick it in". Now, isn't this every boys dream, kicking a door in? SMG in one hand and with one almighty kick with the soul of my boot the Yale lock gave way and we were in. We ran down the corridor to the appropriate flat, Chivers pleading with me "let me kick the next one in!" after you says I. He gave it a hell of a boot and bounced off, unlike the one I kicked in this one had bolts and a mortise lock. It took considerable kicking by both of us over what seemed a lifetime to gain entry.

Ours was not the only arrest taking place and by now the neighbourhood was awake, whistles were blowing and dustbin lids banging to warn the locals and get them out to stop, not only us, but other arresting parties from completing their tasks. Time was now of an essence, we ran from room to room in

the flat till at last we found Rogers sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes, having apparently not heard a thing. He was arrested and told to get dressed, of course he was taking his time, probably hoping the neighbours would come to the rescue. There was no chance of us letting that happen so in the end we frog marched him bare foot to the Saracen and drove him away. I think ours was the first prisoner delivered to the base.

As a post script both Chivers and I were interviewed some months later by the Royal Military Police SIB because there were allegations of brutality made by Rogers. I can categorically say that, yes we were firm, the situation demanded that, but we delivered him unharmed to the reception centre. Who knows what happened after that?



Chivers and me the muscles for the operation

After this, not surprisingly, Newry erupted into an orgy of violence. Our workload increased to a patrol cycle of 48hrs out on patrol and 8 hours off for the first week, then 24 hours on 8hours off for the next week. During this period the SQMS and his lads earned their pay supplying replenishments to the troops. This workload reduced fairly significantly when C Squadron arrived. We were kept out of Newry, it being considered too much of a provocation to go into what had become a virtually out of control town. I remember sitting on one of the overlooking hills seeing the town covered in smoke from burning barricades. It was approximately 2 weeks later that we finally went back in and as you would imagine we were about as popular as turds in a swimming pool.

There were 2 main republican estates in Newry, the Derribeg and Drummer Lane. They had become to all intents and purposes no go areas, as had the majority of republican areas throughout the province. What a mess, rioting, bombing and shooting became much more common place and security force personnel, including our lads, were being wounded and killed on a regular basis.

After a while it was decided that the barricades at Drummer Lane and Derribeg had to be removed. We were given Drummer Lane, the infantry the others. One of the problems already mentioned was every time we approached these republican areas the locals would come out blowing whistles and banging bin lids to get everyone out ready to resist by rioting and in many cases shooting. We therefore developed a cunning plan. Drummer Lane was in effect a triangular shaped estate with a road all around the outside. The troop patrolling that area, especially at night time, would ensure they drove around the boundary every hour or so in low gear with high engine revs to wake the locals up and get them out. They tired first and after a few nights of this the whistle blowers/bin bangers were knackered and we moved in to remove the barricades reasonably quietly. Job well done!

We were then involved in securing the perimeter of the Derribeg estate while a large search operation was carried out. I was given the unenviable Job of standing on the main entrance to the estate like an Aunt Sally stopping and searching anyone entering and leaving. I was in a totally exposed position and almost shamefully I remember my knees starting to shake. It took me a couple of minutes to get a grip of myself and carry on. On one of these occasions I stopped an elderly man to search him and he remarked that during the war he'd fought with the Para's. I asked him what he was doing for a living he replied that he was unemployed and because he was a catholic was unlikely to get work. I asked how a prospective employer would know he was catholic, simple he said, they ask what school you went to! (The majority of schools in the province are either Catholic or Protestant church schools, its blasphemy that our Christian faith is tainted by this behaviour)

Our patrolling then became more widespread, on one occasion we were tasked to go to Coalisland where there was a significant riot underway. The infantry had been called out from Dunganon and I think they had been ambushed on the way. We were not equipped to deal with rioters but could lend some armoured support and fire power if necessary. We had no rubber bullet guns but did carry very pistols and could if required fire very cartridges at crowds. As kids we would have Roman candle fire works duels on bonfire night, very similar.

As we drove into the main street of Coalisland Chivers started to sneeze, a lot! Gas he shouted as he grabbed the first available gas mask and put it on, mine! Sure enough the place was saturated with CS gas and I couldn't find his mask, I fumbled around inside the vehicle in the dark and eventually found his and wore it. From then on I always ensured that mine was behind my seat well away from him. It's amazing that we were affected and not the crowd, wind direction? That night a gunman appeared and took some pot shots at us with no effect. To disperse the crowd some very flares were fired without much effect, then someone fired a schermuly parachute flare at them and it did the trick, they dispersed and did not come back.

I had an unfortunate incident with a Schermuly when responding to a shooting at Flag Staff east of Newry. The local infantry unit were patrolling the border on foot when they reckon they encountered an IRA patrol coming across the border and opened fire on them. We were on mobile patrol in the area and were tasked to go and assist. We arrived on the scene quickly to be greeted by the sound of a fire fight and the sight of an infantryman smashing the headlights of a car that had illuminated them (the driver had failed to switch them off quickly enough when asked to do so). I was asked if we had any schermuly parachute flares, I had and proceeded to put one up. These flares are housed in a tube with a cap at the top and bottom held on with tape, you remove the bottom cap to release the trigger and top to release the rocket. In the excitement I failed to take the tape off the top cap, when I pulled the trigger it blew the bottom out of the tube, poured flame into my groin and down Chivers's neck before it whistled off, singeing us a bit. It then went at head height into the infantry section causing them to scatter. Sadly I was daft enough to do it a second time but I covered my ass by suggesting it must be a faulty batch of rockets. What the phantom IRA patrol had failed to do was achieved successfully by me scattering the patrol in every direction chased by my rockets. For penance I was sent with my Ferret Scout car up the track to the scene of the contact to secure the ground and stayed there, very alert, guarding the scene until first light. It was then that I expected to look over a scene of devastation with dead IRA men lying in the field. However, not a thing, no bodies, no blood trails, not even a brass cartridge case to be found at their "firing point". That made me feel a bit better, I cocked up firing schermulies, the infantry, apparently, shot at shadows.

We'd had a fair bit of excitement but nowhere near that of our infantry. The hours had been long and hard but our first taste of "active service" had done us a power of good, you could say making men of us. There are memories of long, cold, tedious, night patrols. There was the occasional riot with bricks, bottles and petrol bombs, even with shots fired. We were constantly on the lookout for IED's but they were few and far between for "A" Squadron, "C" Squadron as already mentioned, were not so lucky. I have fond memories of driving back to Gosford castle in the cold and grey light of dawn Chivers driving fast using only periscopes for vision. The Ferret swaying from side to side in time to the music as he sang: "On a beautiful morning like this I defy any clouds to appear in the sky". Yes for nearly all of us it was our first taste of active service but we still had an air of optimism about us, how things would change over the coming years and successive tours of duty! On our return to Tidworth we were given 2 weeks leave and it was then on a trip to Blackpool that I was to meet the girl I would marry, Lorraine.

Statistics 1971: the following were reported province wide; 1,515 bombings and 1,756 shootings. Casualties included 48 Soldiers, 11RUC officers, 61 civilians and 58 terrorists killed.

Tour 2

1972 Belfast; Aldergrove and Albert Street mill, Londonderry and Magarafelt.

What was a bad situation in 1971 turned awful in 1972. "A" Squadron was lined up for its second tour; we were to take on the job that "C" Squadron had undertaken in 1970 at Aldergrove airport Belfast. The training for this tour was much more comprehensive; however almost lead to me not going due to a training accident. We were carrying out anti-riot training with assault troop and my job was to keep the rioters occupied while assault troop made a flanking move against them. My idea was to drive fairly quickly towards the barricade they'd erected stop just short and reverse quickly off again. I had a new driver fresh out of training and he misjudged it, went straight through a fairly hefty obstacle and in the process ripped off the brake cables. We managed to stop and get into reverse but by then he was in a panic and failing to respond to my voice commands so I finally, once out of harm's way dismounted to guide him. At the time we didn't know the brakes were shot and he rolled forward and pinned me to a wall, the front glacis plate across my knees. I tried my best to punch his lights out, the idiot, but couldn't quite reach him. The result was a week's stay in BMH Tidworth but they let me out, after much pleading, the weekend before I was due to deploy and I managed to get home to see my parents and Lorraine before embarkation.

The journey over to Belfast was interesting, I was on advance party and we were to travel by train from Tidworth to Liverpool then civilian ferry to Belfast where we were to be picked up by the Household Cavalry guys and taken to Aldergrove. So we collected our train warrants and dressed for war, full combat kit webbing and weapons, we arrived at Andover station 1 hour early for our train to London. So we went into the Railway hotel for a pint and a game of darts. Then it was a train to London, a trip on the underground to Euston, then onwards to Liverpool. On the train north were a group of TA soldiers returning from annual camp, when they found out where we were going they insisted on buying us a pint, this was going to be a journey to remember! We arrived at Lime Street Liverpool in a "happy frame of mind" and there to meet the train and see me off were my parents and Lorraine, made my day! On the ferry crossing we carried on the movement, and disembarked feeling just a little worse for wear.

We deployed with 6 troops of 4x Ferret scout cars that we'd taken over from the Household Cavalry at Aldergrove, assault troop would deploy with their Saracens, driving them up to Liverpool from Tidworth. We were to provide support for the infantry in Belfast and provide a Regular Army presence in the South Antrim Police division. The day the advance party arrived the IRA called a truce and armoured vehicles were banned from the city. Aldergrove was not a bad spot on the edge of the international airport and with the news of a cease-fire we thought that this might be a pretty good place to be. Those hopes were soon dashed, but for a short space of time we enjoyed the countryside of Antrim interspersed with Landrover recesses of the city. We even joined infantry foot patrols of hot spots to familiarise ourselves with the areas. Ten days later the truce was broken, things went from bad to worse and "C" Squadron was deployed for their third emergency tour. They arrived from Tidworth with our vehicles which they then handed over to us, we then moved out of the relative comfort of Aldergrove to Albert Street Mill near the city centre.

Albert Street Mill, what can you say? This six story Victorian mill sat between the city centre and the Falls Road, it was overlooked by the Divis Flats, a place that I can only describe as a IRA controlled, multi-storey, shit hole. We were given the fourth floor of the mill as our accommodation, the lifts did not work and it was 84 steps up to our accommodation. The fourth floor had not been fortified so each time we went up to it we had to carry two sand bags to be used to barricade the windows to protect us from gun fire, so keeping fit was not a problem. Soon timber arrived to form partitions for troop rooms and bunks to sleep in, almost Butlins! The mill yard served as a vehicle park, stunk of sewage and the place was pretty regularly under attack of one sort or another. The final indignity was a bomb floated down the sewer pipe that exploded under the mill, fortunately that was after the bulk of us had moved out. However the food wasn't bad and as a reminder of our days in Singapore we had a choggy shop. This was to be our home for the next two months.

Choggy shops are worth a bit more of a mention. The NAAFI had no shops in these so called forts, so Asian shop keepers bought the franchise off units to run canteens for the troops. I look back with horror at the racial abuse that they got from the blokes in those less PC days but without them we'd have been sunk. They supplied all our goodies, the TV room, snacks, hairdressing and they could lay their hands on most things at a price. However they did pay the price at least two of these civilian workers were killed, one I knew because he was our barber and cut my troops hair on our next tour in Newry. He was ambushed and died of multiple gunshot wounds (17 in all) murdered because he was a barber working for the security forces!

My first taste of real action came before we moved into Albert Street Mill. The cease-fire broke on the newly built Lenadoon housing estate in west Belfast, the IRA decided that they would allocate the houses rather than the local authority. The cease-fire broke with shooting and petrol bombing, the situation became so bad that we given the clearance to shoot not only gunmen but also petrol bombers. 5th troop was equipped with 4 lightly armoured Ferret scout cars, a 2-man machine meant for recognisance. Our job that afternoon was to keep the main roads to the north and east of the estate free from rioters and barricades, another troop got the south and west roads.

We'd adopted the principle of all round defence, the 1st car covered 90 degrees to the front, the 2nd car, me, 90 degrees left, the 3rd car 90 degrees right, last car 90 degrees to the rear, that's 360 degrees. Great in theory, poor in practice because half way through our patrol was a sharp right hand corner. As we went around it I was covering left and because of the bend nobody was covering to the right, my rear, the gunmen had noticed this and set their ambush. The first I heard was 8 shots hitting my vehicle. I was travelling head up out of the turret with just thin macrolon sheet for protection, good for stones but not bullets at that range. I looked over my shoulder and saw the gunman still aiming his Thompson machine gun preparing to fire some more. Now, who says men can't multitask? My right hand hit the seat release dropping me into the turret, at the same time my left was cocking the .30 browning machine gun, my shoulders were swinging the turret round to meet the threat and return fire and my right hand then went up to shut the hatch. That's when I heard breaking glass and petrol splashed over my head and shoulders, we'd been petrol bombed. Fortunately the bomber had, perhaps, panicked when he saw the turret turning and failed to light it or it had extinguished when thrown, who knows, but it didn't ignite. I'd got away with it. So had the gunman because he'd dashed off into the estate. Sadly that night, and I'm told in the same place Mr Robert Williams-Wynn didn't (he'd been our commander on internment night). The Gunman, this time using what I believe was an AR16 rifle, shot him. The bullet passed through his headset, exited his head, hit the turret wall, ricochet down into the drivers back. Robert was killed instantly, his wounded driver managed to drive to the military hospital some 5 miles away before collapsing. Lasher Hansell his driver was mentioned in despatched for his action that day. I believe it was AR16 because I saw the head set Robert had been wearing and the bullet hole looked about 5.56mm. It was the 13th July and it was a shock to us all, as for me "there but for the grace of God....."

"C" Squadron arrived with our vehicles and we swapped over and took our Saladin armoured cars into the city, the republican press loved to report the British occupiers were patrolling the streets in tanks. We were given a number of tasks including white road patrols and general support for the infantry. We became very much rent a troop going where we were required. White road patrols comes from the tribal maps we were using in Belfast. Loyalist areas were coloured orange republican green and the main roads throughout the city were white. In theory white road patrols were as suggested by the title supposed to keep them clear of terrorist activity and also have a visible armoured presence throughout town. The vast majority of these patrols were in republican areas and it became rare for patrols to go out without coming under fire.

On one occasion a number of us were given the opportunity of an afternoon off in the relatively safe town of Lisburn so we packed into a Landrover and off we went. The problem with these trips was you had to get in and out of Albert Street in one piece. The inevitable happened we as arrived back, when we turned down the street a gun man opened up on us. Our driver just about put his boot through the floor and got us through the main gate on two wheels, we got out high on adrenaline but deep inside were glad to be alive. I remember Ron commenting that he wasn't scared by it and at the time neither was I but it was a close run thing.

There were very many incidents that blur into one, however one in particular sticks in my mind. We are often reminded of Bloody Sunday with its hugely prolonged and expensive enquiry, however, bloody Friday rarely if ever gets a mention. On 21st July 1972 between 2.10 and 3.15 a total of 19 bombs exploded in various parts of Belfast. 7 civilians and 2 soldiers were killed, those injured included 77 women and girls and 55 men and boys. I remember this because at the time I was off duty writing a letter to Lorraine and I commented in the letter each time a bomb went off. Our troop was crashed out as the 9th bomb exploded. We rushed down to our vehicles and as you can imagine the vehicle park was slightly chaotic as the various troops/platoons tried to crash out. I stood of the back decks of my Ferret leaning with my hands on the rear corner of the turret armour and I shouted down to my driver who was in his seat to reverse to let an infantry pig out (Humber 1 ton armoured personnel carrier). I then shouted stop because one was driving behind us, as he stopped the commander's hatch slammed shut hitting my forearm and driving the rear armour plate into the palm of my right hand. At first I thought I had a grazed/bruised arm, but then I noticed blood dripping onto my boot, I had a very nasty gash to the palm of my hand. Our Medic and old friend Frank Hammond took a look and said it would need a few stitches

and I was taken to see the doctor for treatment. Probably the most painful part was the pain killing jabs given down the inside of the wound before he stitched me up, 9 stitches in all. Now stitches could be good because they usually came with a cash, compensation payment of £25 per stitch and I'm thinking I'm in the money, but no, the medic asked the doctor if he should fill in the relevant forms for compensation and was told no. That's life.

This wound or was it an injury was to change my routine dramatically. I was to move to the Ops room until I'd healed enough to handle a weapon and go back out on patrol. That was about 4 days later when I was out riding shotgun for the squadron leader. The Ops room was not the most exiting place to work but I was a trained signaller so I soon got into the routine of 6hours on 6 off. There were 1 or 2 lighter moments; the squadron second in command came in the first evening I was on duty to send the evening sitrep. I had my arm in a sling, and I was expected to type his dictation straight onto a teleprinter having never learned how to type or use the machine. Add to that there had been a party in the Officers mess and he came in whisky in hand smoking a large cigar. I did my best and next morning, on my next shift, there was an almighty rollicking from Brigade about a sitrep that was total none sense. In comes the 2 i/c to rollick who ever had sent the message, me. I quietly reminded him that I was a qualified operator, capable of taking down dictation and it was he who he had the whisky and cigars, there then followed the sound of echoing footsteps as he left the stage.

I soon settled into the dull routine broken only by riding shotgun for various SHQ officers on their trips out. We had lightly armoured Landrovers, not high velocity bullet proof. The tailgate was left down and a retaining frame was attached from the roof, the shot gun rider stood out on the tail gate inside the frame so as not to fall off. It was alright for those riding in some safety inside the vehicle but left those riding shotgun vulnerable to all and sundry. The shot gun riders were generally left freezing cold, soaking wet, dodging bricks and hoping no one would open fire or worse still set IED's. But it got us out of the mill!

One afternoon when sat as duty operator Charlie the signals sergeant came in and informed us that we were to change frequency which involved taking down the 27ft mast to change the antenna. The antenna was on the roof of the mill in full view of Divis flats. Now nobody in their right mind was going out on that roof in broad daylight, it meant exposing yourself to the high probability of sniper fire, Charlie asked Frank Hammond to do it. He refused and there was no way I was going up there, besides I was injured and needed on the sets. After a fair bit of arguing and threats Charlie decided he would do it himself and up he went. The masts are telescopic and each section is held in place by a screw binding, if you are not careful and release the bottom one too quickly the whole thing telescopes down and traps the skin between the thumb and forefinger. He wasn't careful and it did, there was a yelp and a call for help "Hammond (who was the medic) get up here now my ***** hands trapped. Reluctantly he did and we rescued Charlie complete with megga blood blisters.

It was when riding shotgun for the Squadron leader that I got the heads up that a big operation was to happen. We'd taken him to Musgrave Park hospital to visit one of the lads who was wounded (probably Lasher Hansel). As we waited in the main entrance of the military wing we noticed lots of fresh stretchers piled against a wall. They hinted that they were expecting casualties; something big was going to happen.



Riding shotgun once again with Chivers

The biggest operation we were involved in was Operation Motor man. No go areas sprang up again all over the province. These involved large barricades mainly in republican areas where in effect the IRA took control, dishing out their kind of justice and operating fairly openly. The operation was to clear the barricades and root out the IRA. This is one operation where tanks, Royal Engineers Centurion AVRE, were actually used in Londonderry to clear barricades thought to be booby-trapped. They came ashore from a landing ship bulldozed the barricade and re-embarked the same day. Like internment on our previous tour we were briefed the night before the operation on our tasks. I was now recovered enough to leave the ops room and our troop was to support the Parachute Regiment as they cleared the Balimurphy estate. This estate had a fearsome reputation as a hot bed of republicanism and terrorism. We thought, as did the medics, that we were in for a big fight, extra ammo was issued and we made sure that our vehicles and we were up to the task. Then of all things the Secretary of State, I think it was William Whitelaw, came on the television and radio to warn the population to stay indoors as there was to be a large military operation the next morning. I understand that that night the M1 motorway was full of IRA men in cars heading to safety in the south. The whole operation went like clockwork with hardly a round fired. The only embarrassment was our troop leader suddenly fancied himself as a Para, started wearing his beret para fashion, badge over left ear, a low slung 9mm pistol and walking with a swagger, pratt!!!

We had worked the "Murph" before and I remember arriving at the base which I believe was called the Henry Taggart hall, There was no parking inside for our vehicles so they had to be left outside on the road, a guard covering them from a sanger. Outside of the hall was a small area of rough ground surrounded with coils of barbed wire and the whole instulation complete with electrically fire smoke bombs inside the coils. The place was frequently attacked and the largest sand bagged wall I've ever seen protected the entrance. A searchlight could be directed remotely into the estate and the guard used a periscope to look out so as not to be exposed to sniper fire, very First World War! We arrived as a troop, dismounted as one and ran across the spare ground to the safety of the wall. Once inside we bedded down on the floor of a spare room and waited for orders. It's worth mentioning that if there was nothing immediate to do sleep became a priority, day or night, because you never knew when you would get your next kip. We were asked if we wanted a meal, that's the next priority when stood down. One of their guys said he would take us to the cookhouse and proceeded to put on his helmet and flak jacket. When asked why, he told us that we had to run the gauntlet from the living accommodation to the cookhouse some 25-30 mtrs away, it was open ground and 2 of their guys had been shot doing that trip. While we were there the Engineers were busy putting up sight barriers to prevent a reoccurrence. I remember a foolish act the following day when we were tasked to carry out a mobile patrol in the estate. As usual as troop corporal I was leading when someone dragged a plank that had had 6 inch nails driven through it into the road, the idea was to puncher my tires as I drove over it. We had run flat tyres so that even 4 punctures wouldn't have stopped me. Stupidly I climbed out of my Ferret picked up the plank and strapped it to the side of my vehicle, gave them the V and drove on. It was only afterwards that I thought; "I wonder is that was an ambush I'd just driven into?" Who knows?

After Motorman things did start to quieten down a bit, for a while we even managed to do some Saladin driver training interspersed with patrols. Someone had the bright idea that we could carry out OP's on the main routs in and out of Belfast, taking make model and registration of cars entering and leaving the city. I sat for a few days in a ditch next to the M1 bored stiff with writer's cramp, for what, who knows? But a big change was to happen first for me and then the squadron.

My hand had healed quickly and I was posted to our Assault Troop as troop Corporal. Assault troop was our own integral infantry troop and was by far the most fun that I had as a corporal I loved it!!!! They were a great bunch of lads, a bit rough around the edges, as tough as old boots and with a reputation around the regiment for their toughness. I can say without any reservation that this was some of the happiest soldiering I ever did. The initial tasks we had were to carry out foot patrols in the countryside around the outskirts of Belfast. We'd be dropped of at dawn with food and water for the day and picked up at dusk and taken back to Albert Street. They were long days but it was great to get out of town, on one such patrol we discovered what looked like a rifle range in a disused quarry, I reported it but don't know if anything came of it.

It was then all change again, first we moved to Drumahoe factory on the outskirts of Londonderry where we had just enough time to settle down before moving onto the small town of Magherafelt. There we came under command of 2nd Royal Green Jackets (The Black Mafia). We lived in the luxury of the police station and had the town to our selves. This is where my memory fails me, I think I must have gone on R&R when the move happened because I remember arriving at the police station a few days after the troop had settled in. I was dropped of and walked into a deserted police station with the exception of Bobby Broe manning the phone. Now clearly some of the troop were out on patrol because their vehicle

were gone, but not all were out. Finally I got it out of him, the others were in the pub next door and if they were needed Bobby would jump out of the TV room window run to the pub and get them. I wasn't altogether happy with this and went straight next door to round them up. I think they saw me coming because as soon as I walked in someone pushed a pint in my hand and introduced me to Cornelius the landlord. That was the pattern of things to come and how our new troop leader and troop sergeant were introduced. However, it wasn't all beer and skittles, but what a change from Belfast. The town was relatively quiet but around and about it was quite different, we were on the edge of what was called the murder triangle where many savage sectarian murders were carried out. We patrolled the town, carried out mobiles around the surrounding areas, by day and night and attended numerous bombs and hoaxes.

On one of our patrols we did a rummage through some out building on a farm and I found some military type of clothing with a hood with eyeholes cut in it. Clearly it was for terrorist use, we handed it to the police but heard no more. On our night patrols we developed a way of de-bussing and en-bussing from our Saracens while on the move this enabled us to be dropped of in patrol areas undetected. This was great until my radio operator Jeff Henry fell and broke his collar bone, we didn't know it was broken at the time so left him hid up in a hedge until we completed our patrol and took him back to base for treatment. Incidentally, the last I heard of Jeff, who I remember as a great cross-country runner, mild mannered, a likeable bloke, he was doing a life sentence along with his sister for murder.



On patrol with Steve Redhead and Paddy Breslin

We acquired a troop dog, a golden retriever called Saxon, perhaps I should say that Saxon acquired a troop. He would pick us up as we patrolled the town and follow us every where, in the end his owner said we might as well keep him and our new Troop leader Richard Hughes became his official owner. Saxon was, however, responsible for an unfortunate incident. Every each week the local ladies from the town would bake cakes and bring them to the police station as a gift for us. Our troop sergeant thought it would be a good idea if 2 of our troopers went to meet them at the gate, to give our thanks and bring the cakes in. It was a pretty wet miserable night when they did and Saxon duly followed them. As the lads took the cakes the bottom fell out of the box and as they all bent over to pick them up Saxon decided to mount one of the ladies, that was the last cake delivery we received. He would go everywhere with us including helicopter trips. When we searched cars he'd sniff around them, doing his bit which usually included peeing on all four wheels, much to the annoyance of the car owners.

One of tasks was to monitor the use of explosives in one of the local quarries. When the blasting was taking place we, along with a police constable, would have to count the 1 Kilo sticks of explosives as they were tamped into the holes for blasting. Then we'd sit in our Saracen probably a little to near to the blast area to ensure no one came to remove any till it was detonated. On one particular occasion we were asked by the police if 2kilos could be used on a private job. A local farmer was clearing a field when he came across a large boulder just beneath the surface. This turned out, after a lot of digging to be about the size of a mini car. They could vouch for him so we agreed to go along with this and drove to the farm where the explosives were duly placed. A number of us had done mines and demolition courses so reckoned we knew the score. We retired to a suitable distance to stop any traffic or pedestrians getting too near while the explosives did their work. I think they'd underestimated the power of 2 Kilos of

commercial explosives, it certainly did the trick lifting the rock, in two pieces out of the ground. It also showered us in rubble, broke a number of windows and removed some roof tiles at the farm house.

All in all this had been an "interesting" tour. We'd seen the best and worst of the Northern Irish people. On operation Motorman we'd participated in a massive operation against hard line republican areas, we'd lost one good officer and were lucky not to lose others. 1972 was probably the most difficult year the army faced in Northern Ireland. In those early days at Albert Street we rarely went on patrol without coming under fire, however we were the lucky ones inside our metal boxes. On the 4th November we returned to Tidworth, once again via Liverpool, however this was to be a home coming with a difference.

The squadron were invited to drive into Manchester to a reception at a new pub on the Hulme estate called The Hussar. The pub boasted our regimental badge as a pub sign and had our badge woven into the carpets. We got a great reception, better than Liverpool where youths threw stones at some of our cars as they drove through. It was a great lunchtime session with beer and speeches but probably not a good idea when we faced a 200 mile drive down the motorway to Tidworth. We managed to keep our drivers relatively sober but it was a bladder bursting journey down the M6. On the 8th November we got 2 weeks post tour leave.

Statistics 1972, that year there were 1,853 bombings and 10,564 shootings recorded. A total of 129 soldiers, 17 policemen, 223 civilians and 98 terrorists were killed.

Tour 3,

Gosford Castle and Newry 1974.

In 1973 the Regiment returned from Tidworth to Herford Germany as an Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment, there we soon converted from Saladin armoured cars to Scorpion light reconnaissance tanks. I also, at very short notice, married Lorraine who I'd met at the end of my first tour, started courting seriously just before my second tour. We hired a small flat in Herford, Lorraine moved in and within a couple of weeks I moved out to start, what was now a prolonged training period leading up to our deployment back to Ireland. In all I was away for the best part on 8 months and during the tour Lorraine returned to England and stayed with an aunt, but more of that later.

At the start of this training period I was promoted in A Sqn to Sergeant and at the age of 24 took over as troop sergeant of 3rd troop who were without a troop leader. Mr Wetherall-Pepper would arrive later, fresh from Sandhurst and with no experience of Troop Leading. Having said that he was a smashing young officer who sadly went onto die in a traffic accident in Cyprus a couple of years later.

The Regiment was to return to Gosford Castle but we were to have troops deployed in various locations including Newry Police station, Newton Hamilton and Newcastle. We were, as a troop equipped with 2 Striped down Land rovers and 2 Ferret scout cars. The Land rovers had originally had Macralon armour fitted but it was felt to be safer without because it was easier to return fire, I kept the roof on mine for a bit of shelter, Mr W-P didn't and got wet but he mounted a .30 Browning machine gun on pintol mount in the rear of his rover. We were to take over from the Queens Own Hussars and just like our last tour at the castle there was no love lost between the 2 units. The castle had improved slightly, there were Portaloos but thinking back little else had changed. There was a small squadron bar in the cellar on the building and that's where our first incident took place. It was the last night for the QOH, they were ensuring we knew it and after a while our boys had had enough. The Toilet facilities for the bar were crude, in fact the same large buckets that we'd enjoyed on our first tour. A couple of our lads emptied all the piss into one bucket and then they went back in and asked "any QOH in here?" When they answered yes our lads just said "well cop for this piss takers" and splash! It was immensely satisfying but a bad move that cost them a nights sleep as they were forced to scrub the place clean.

The idea was that the troops would rotate through the various locations at 2 week intervals and 3rd Troops first detachment was to be Newry where we would be based at the police station. We were to be attached to 7 RHA the parachute Gunners. Having worked in Newry on our 71 tour I knew the place reasonably well but over the coming 4 months I was to get to know it intimately. From this you will have guessed that our 2 week attachment grew to a full four month tour there. 7 RHA where a great bunch of lads, we jelled straight away and we managed to persuade our Squadron leader Major Pemberton to allow us to stay.

This was brilliant for us because it meant that we were no longer rent a troop flitting from place to place and never really getting to know anywhere or anybody particularly well. I suppose the nearest we had come to this was in Magherafelt, but 6 weeks is nowhere near enough time to really get to know a place. So we settled in to our new surroundings, the lads in a large room upstairs in the police station, with me and the troop leader sharing a small brick built shed in the yard. It was claustrophobic but the food and company was good. Our routine was mainly mobile patrolling, quick reaction to incidents around the outskirts of town, some foot patrolling, Op's, manning the permanent VCP and any other odd job that could be found for us.

Living in a police station near the border comes with its disadvantages, the IRA likes to blow them up and ours was no exception. Our turn came with a large car bomb parked outside on a dark miserable evening. All the troop were in and some were taking a chance to have a shower when the alarm was raised and we were told to get out immediately. The showers were on the ground floor and unfortunately a couple of the lads evacuated wearing little more than a bath towel. Not collecting their weapons and kit on the way out was not good enough and got me a rollicking, these things happen, they evacuated as ordered by the police but I made sure they never left their weapons behind again! We cordoned off the area and a little later it exploded, it was a big one and we found the engine block about 25mtrs away. Our building was well fortified so the damage was superficial and after a clean up of fallen plaster and broken glass we carried on in what had become very draughty accommodation.



One of our more difficult patrols

Bombs became a bit of a feature of this tour and we became adept at handling them with a minimum of manpower. We normally patrolled as half troop sections, the section consisted of the Ferret scout car (fire power) and land rover with 4 of the troop and often a member of the RMP. My section was called out to a reported bomb (IED) in the centre of Warren Point. Someone had gone into the central car dealership with a Calorgas bottle filled home made with explosives and put it on the counter. When they left the owner of the business was brave (daft) enough to carry outside into the main street. When we arrives, all 6 of us, we had to clear the area. It was mid afternoon and the schools due out. I noticed an alley way from the local school onto the main street about 50 mtrs from the bomb so I placed myself in the alley to stop anyone coming down it. The rest of the lads cordoned off the street while I can only imagine that the police had cordoned off the other end of town because I didn't have the men to do it. As we waited for bomb disposal to arrive I noticed a door opposite the alley open and an old lady start to come out. I shouted to her to get back in but she either was confused or couldn't hear me and kept coming so I decided that the only thing to do was to take a chance dash across and get her back in. Off course the obvious happened, I was half way across the road, 50 mtrs from it when it went off, I didn't know I could run that fast or get my head inside my flack jacket, but apart from a ringing in the ears I got away with it.

The IRA didn't always get away with it, a foot patrol from 7RHA found an IED, it was a beer barrel full of explosives but not yet primed with detonators. A decision was made not to lift the explosives but to put an OP/ambush on it in the hope of capturing the bombers. A time limit of 14 days and nights was put on the operation, if after that time it was not primed, it would be lifted. It was the afternoon of the 14th day that the IRA came to set the fuses. My section was out on mobile patrol and one of our tasks was immediate back up to the OP/ambush. Over the radio came a contact report from the OP site and request for medical assistance, there'd been a fire and casualties. We were given the location of the site, until then it was a secret and immediately set off to support the OP team. On our way there we were diverted to the main base to collect the doctor and take him to the scene. It transpired that the IRA men turned up to fuse the bomb, did not surrender immediately when challenged, and were shot dead. I delivered the doctor to the site where we found the 2 dead IRA men laying together just over a wall. I hung around for a while till he pronounced them dead. The op was being commanded by a Corporal who originated from Dublin and ironically was called Paddy, I got to know him well from various jobs we did together, he was a good bloke. My section had stayed with the vehicles when I escorted the doctor up to the site, of course they were all keen to have a look so I let them go up 2 at a time to do so. The news of the killings soon reached Newry and the town was paralysed with car bombs and I was tasked to deal with one of them. The last two of my section had not yet seen the bodies and were really miffed when I said they couldn't and we had to go to the bomb scare.

We arrived at the bomb to find a red van parked across one of the main roads out of town. An admin vehicle from the household cavalry had discovered it. The vehicle commander had been brave (daft) enough to go and look in the back where he saw a box with wires coming out of it. Once again we cordoned off the road with minimum manpower and waited for ATO (bomb disposal). It would be a fair wait because most of the roads in and out of town were now blocked. Finally he arrived and sent wheel barrow (robot) to look inside. He smashed the rear windows with it and dropped a small charge in to detonate the device. Just as he was doing it I got a tap on the shoulder, it was the owner of the van. I asked what was in the back and he described his tool box with the wire handles, it wasn't a bomb after all, then came the bang as ATO's charge exploded. The back doors blew off and the sides bulged out, "Sorry about that mate if you'd only got here 5 minutes earlier...." It was a red van with racing style wing mirrors, I had a red car at home and as a consolation to him offered to buy the mirrors, I can't remember his exact reply but it was two words ending in OFF! Later that night my section was given time off to attend a party at the RHA main base where we celebrated a successful operation against the IRA by drinking far too much beer.

As a sad post script, a few days later we arrived back at the police station from a patrol to find ATO defusing a number of cigarette packet incendiaries. These, as the name implies, were cigarette packets containing inflammables and a timer, they'd be dropped in the pockets of garments in shops to set the place on fire. (that's one of the reasons that you now buy suits with the pockets sewn up) He was really cool and let me watch him for a while, it's the last I ever saw of him, he was killed a few days later defusing a bomb.

The bad times did not end there, half troops were given a night off and we went back to the castle for a break and a couple of beers. I was stood at the bar when my old friend Mick Herbert came in and we had a beer together. Mick was in civilian cloths and was about to leave in our unmarked van with lads returning from R&R. This was normal procedure they'd be picked up from Belfast airport and taken to the various bases. I say Mick was an old friend, he transferred into our regiment about the same time I joined, to me he was an old soldier, he'd served as a corporal in the Royal tank Regiment and seen active service in the Far East. He was the guy who saw me sat on my own in the squadron bar as a new boy, my first weekend in Germany, and said "what are you doing there, get your suit on, we're going down town". He showed me the ropes. We served on the same tank and taught me much about how to be an effective crewman. He left the army only to return again, however, this time as a married man and our friendship returned. We had our drink together and he said he'd see me about and left. He never did because a couple of hours later he was dead along with another friend Joe Cotton. I went to bed that night having had a couple of beers and slept like a log, but remember waking up when there was obviously something going on, however that was not my problem because we were stood down for the night, so turned over and went back to sleep. It was next morning when I found out that the activity that woke me was troops crashing out to the aid of Mick and Joe.

I'm told that Mick was on his way to Newton Hamilton to drop off some lads when the van broke down. A police car arrived on the scene, parked some way in front of them and as Mick went forward to speak to them he was shot dead. The police also shot at the lads in the back of the van who then scattered into the surrounding fields. A message had be got back to SHQ before the shooting about the break down and Joe Cotton had set off, not knowing about the shooting in another unmarked vehicle with a mechanic to

fix the van. He arrived on the scene to find Mick dead and because he had no radio communications went to the nearest Telephone box to report what had happened. Whilst in the box the same police car arrived opened fire and killed Joe. I'm told that Joe's driver returned fire and finally played dead it was then established that this was a Blue on Blue incident, some call it friendly fire!

As you would imagine the next day things were bad, I returned with my half troop to Newry to brief the lads on what had happened. We then got a visit from Major Pemberton who briefed me and the troop leader on what had happened and was clearly worried about any trouble that might occur between our troop and the police we were billeted with, we were given clear instructions not to speak with them. It was the Station Sergeant who first approached me; he was clearly devastated at what had happened. He told me how couldn't understand why those policemen had been in that area, apparently they were special branch or flying squad from Armagh, outside their divisional area. There was lots of speculation, just a few days earlier a policeman had been murdered manning a security barrier at Newton Hamilton, maybe they were on the hunt for the IRA gang that did it? The fact remains Mick and Joe, who were both newly married, were dead. I swapped my R&R with one of the troop so I could attend Mick's funeral, a sad day, Mick's widow with her new born daughter followed behind the coffin being carried by Mick's brothers. As I reflect on it, at the time I put this whole terrible incident straight to the back of my mind, there was no time for prolonged grieving not even for a friend. We were living in dangerous times in a dangerous place, I had a job to do and I suppose the training kicked in. As a post script, this dreadful incident barely made the press because on that same night there was an unsuccessful attempt, in London, to kidnap our Colonel in Chief, The Princess Anne. Shots were fired and I believe her driver and detective were hit. Joe Cottons Son became my Squadron Clerk a few years later when I was Squadron Sergeant Major of D Squadron.

The day I was returning from R&R the Mr Wetherall-Pepper's half troop saw action. They were patrolling the Dublin road when they came across a truck that had just been hijacked and a bomb put on board. He gave chase to the bombers and ran their car off the road. One of the bombers was shot as he tried to escape, there is some confusion as to who did what to whom, however another bomber was shot and wounded the intention being that they would get him to go and defuse the bomb. It was about then that the Southern Irish police arrived and it would seem that the chase had taken the troop south of the border. There was an exchange of views, the police demanding the troop hand over their weapons, the troop all fired up and in no mood for any nonsense. In the end the troop withdrew north leaving their prisoners with the police. That night I received another visit from Major Pemberton, my troop leader was away being interviewed by the police. I was fresh back from the UK and trying to get a grip of an excited troop, he told me that my boss would either be cashiered or a hero before the night was out. He was mentioned in despatches as a hero!

I hadn't heard the last of Newton Hamilton but this concerns my wife and it happened just after Mick's death. Lorraine was staying with her aunt in Oldham and was employed selling ladies lingerie at a local department store, she was doing well and had been offered the supervisors post. Lorraine was befriended by an Irish woman at work. On learning that I was doing a tour of duty in Armagh she invited Lorraine to go over to stay with her in Newton Hamilton saying that we could spend some time together. As I've said IRA was very active around there, a policeman had just been murdered and two of our friends killed on their way there. We'll never know for sure what may have happened if Lorraine had accepted the invitation. I believe there was more than an even chance that she would have been kidnapped and possibly murdered by the IRA who had already killed army Families. When I heard from Lorraine about the invitation I was frightened out of my wits we decided that she should inform her manager that she was leaving her job immediately, forfeiting any pay owed. Lorraine also insisted that her address was not to be released to anyone, especially her new Irish "friend".

It was also a sad time when John Tyson, known to his mates as Musky was killed in a traffic accident while on patrol.

We would on occasions search derelict properties in the off chance that they were being used by the IRA as stores. There was one that caught my eye on a number of occasions and on this occasion I had a sniffer dog with me so we decided to have a look. We gained entry by firing a couple of baton rounds at the door (I got in a bit of trouble for this, apparently I should have asked for permission to use them). I sent the dog in first followed by the handler then me, once inside the handler said "can you hear ticking?" I could and we were out of there quicker than you could say Jack Robinson. We were about to clear the area when I noticed that my Landrover engine was running and we had a loose tapit, all we could hear in the house was that tapit ticking. It was red face and much Mickey taking that night.

On another occasion Cpl Paka Singh our troop corporal found some explosives on a bus, no one individual could be implicated with them so he stood by the driver and said the immortal words to the all of the passengers "As a member of her majesties forces I arrest you". On another occasion when we had the sniffer dog with us the handler asked if we could put a magazine of ammunition somewhere on the bus for his dog to find. We did, the dog didn't, and we couldn't find it because all the seats looked the same and the idiot hiding it didn't count the rows before hiding it.

This was a good tour for a young Troop Leader and Troop Sergeant, we all got back in one piece having done ourselves proud as a troop. A few things still stick in my mind, rarely a week goes by without me thinking about Mick. Every time I hear the pop song Seasons in the sun and the line "good bye my friend its hard to die when all the birds are singing in the sky" I can remember as if it was yesterday, my radio operator singing it quietly to himself as we sat on a check point on the Dublin Road one sunny Sunday afternoon. It was my first job with any real responsibility, many decisions were potentially life or death decisions, not only for myself but for the other members of the troop. Once again we had witnessed the best and the worst of the Irish people. From an amazing tea stop at a farm on the edge of the Mourne mountains with home made soda bread, butter and jam to vicious bombers with no regard for human life, but this was just a taste of things to come.



Lorraine and I at a Mess Dinner a couple of years later.

Statistics in 1974, there were 1383 bombings, 3206 shootings 56 soldiers, 15 police, 145 civilians and 22 terrorists Killed.

Tour 4

Andersonstown Belfast 1978.



On this tour we were to get up close and personal, our previous tours, including Newry, had been more vehicle mounted and in support of other units. On this tour the regiment were to deploy dismounted in the infantry role and take over the Andersonstown, Lenadoon, Twinbrook estates and their surrounding areas from 3rd Battalion the Queens Regiment. We were to be the first non-infantry unit to take over a relatively tough area and it would prove to be a challenge. When we received order to deploy we were based in Hohne West Germany as Chieftain Tank regiment. So our first challenge was to convert to the infantry role and then train for urban warfare. I was by now a much more experienced troop sergeant and the CO sent for me and said he wanted me to become part of the Regiments Intelligence organisation. My response was that I was willing to do Intelligence work providing it was a uniformed role but I would not volunteer for an undercover job. It was agreed that I would become the Int NCO for D squadron. This would involve attending various courses to learn the “spying” trade. It may sound glamorous but in fact was very mundane work mainly collating information on terrorist suspects, trying to work out patterns and predict their next moves. But as it turns out it was probably the most dangerous job I’d ever undertook while equally the most exciting and fulfilling.

The training was tough but fun; it involved courses in the UK and endless hours of tactics, learning about our TAOR (tactical area of responsibility) learning how to identify known terrorists, fitness, weapon training and tactics. For this tour we were going to be well and truly prepared.



A visit, during training by the Princess Royal

One of the highlights of the training was the numerous visits to the urban close quarter battle ranges. There we would go into a rifle range designed as a village to deal with any number of situations, we would come under simulated fire and as a patrol manoeuvre, return fire and resolve the situation. It was as near to realism as you could get and makes computer games seem tame. Finally after a number of very trying exercises we were considered ready for what ever Belfast had to throw at us. After a spot of leave I left on the pre advance party to learn the ropes in our Squadron TAOR Andersonstown.

The regiment was to be split between 4 bases, RHQ at fort Monagh with a company of Guards. HQ Sqn was to be based at Musgrave Park along side the military wing of the hospital. A and B Sqns were accommodated jointly at Woodburn camp, while D Sqn occupied Glassmullin camp, know locally as silver city. It’s worth describing the accommodation, Glassmullin was a purpose built fort in the middle of Andersonstown. Constructed of corrugated iron sheets it was a traditional fort except it didn’t have a moat. The walls were about 20 ft high, there were watch towers in each corner and mid way between on the side walls and a fortified gate house. The walls had plenty of bullet holes from previous attacks and we knew that once outside the gate we were very much in hostile territory, imagine fort apache only surrounded by housing estates rather than desert.

The accommodation was pretty reasonable, we lived in portacabins, a bit cramped but warm and dry. We had Officers and Sergeants messes, a canteen for the boys complete with chogie shop, sauna and

multigym. The food was good and we were allowed two cans of beer a day, so not a lot to complain about. There was also a small police post on the base. To bring us up to the established strength we had a troop of Queens Dragoon Guards attached for the duration of the tour plus a platoon from the resident infantry battalion, The Prince of Wales Own joined us for a while mid tour. There were also a variety of other trades such as dog handlers and Pig Drivers (1 ton armoured personnel carrier). Our main mode of transport for patrolling was to be our flat feet. We had a few land rovers that were in various states of armoured protection from completely stripped down and open to the elements to vehicles with a roof but no doors or sides to Land rovers with full macralon (Fiberglas) armour and Humber pig APCs. As well as patrolling our TAOR we were responsible for guarding Andersonstown Police Station (reputed to be the most shot at police station in the world) and the Echelon at Musgrave Park (Sleepy Hollow). The later being much to the displeasure of the lads.

The Int Cell was manned 24-7 by a total of eight of us our job was to try and keep the squadron up to date on all intelligence matters and also forward any intelligence we may have learned upwards through the Regimental Int cell. The Regiment also tasked us with gathering intelligence; this generally was low-grade stuff but helped put together the big picture. We were equipped with an early computer with a very basic database of local residents and known players, this was kept locked in a small room and only accessed by a very limited number of personnel. It had details of individuals, that these days with facebook etc seems very basic, our lads on patrol could "P" check, that is check the personal details of individuals they'd stopped using us and our database. This enabled us to keep track of the known players and their associates. We would task patrols to gather information and debrief them on their return. The theory was that no patrol would leave our base without a specific task; we were not to patrol for patrolling sake. Most days we would be tasked by Regimental Int to make arrests for questioning and we would pass these onto the relevant troop, however occasionally we would lift people for the RUC special branch. These arrests were usually made in the early hours of the morning or early evening, more of that as the story unfolds.



Some of the Int Cell including Jim Adamson, self, Quazie Baldwin Joe Handley, ? and Chalky White

Our method of operation in the Int cell was mostly to travel as a four-man team in our partially striped down land rover. Normally vehicles travelled in pairs and patrols normally consisted of eight men mounted in two vehicles, however we had permission to travel singly. This came at a risk but we lessened that by our speed of travel, irregular routs and timings plus using ploys such as keeping civilian vehicles between us a know trouble spots. I would use this ploy on our regular trips passed the Balley Murphy Estate, I would effect an overtaking manoeuvre but stay on the outside of the civilian car or bus using it as a shield until we'd passed the danger spots. I remember doing it with the Squadron Leader in the passenger seat

next to me. The look on his face as we roared along on the wrong side of the road, next to a civilian car, with its driver looking equally perturbed, was amazing, but it kept us relatively safe. We kept a roof on our rover for some protection from the rain but the doors were removed, the theory being it was better for returning fire if ambushed. Our vehicle was also fitted with Clarabell radar, which would indicate which direction shots, had come from if we came under fire. I would always drive for two reasons, my personal weapon was a pistol while the lads had rifles, therefore they could return more effective fire and I knew where I wanted to go and didn't want to have to give directions to the driver. On the whole fast and sometimes erratic driving worked very well, we always got back to base safe and sound, if a bit shaken.

My introduction to Andersonstown came courtesy of Jim Piper the Intelligence NCO I was there to relieve. Jim was a great guy, full of local knowledge, pretty fearless in his actions and probably the greatest practical joker I've ever met. He had instigated a way of working for his Int cell that I was to copy. His view and mine was that the best way to collect intelligence was to get out into the area as much as possible, get to know as many of the bad guys as possible, to see who was associating with who and to make their lives as difficult as possible. Much of this involved guilt by association, if you mix with terrorist, the chances are you are one or at least are in sympathy with them. Our hope was to make life so difficult that people would no longer mix with the hard liners and they would become isolated. This also let them know that we knew exactly who they were and we were watching for any opportunity to arrest them. In effect every time we met a hard liner we would question them, asking for their name and address, where they were going etc, we would ask the same of anyone who was with them. We would then carry out a "P" check on them, all such encounters were recorded and submitted weekly as part of my Int summary. This kept our boys busy but was a real pain for the known players who knew we knew all their details but still had to go through this routine every time we saw them. We carried photographic lists of the known players, some where simply to report back on, some stop and search, while others were arrest on sight.

One sure-fire way of spotting these people involved visiting every drinking haunt in the TAOR at least twice a day. It was known that the bad guys tended to hang out in these haunts especially after they had been up to no good and they needed a drink to calm their nerves. Pub checks, as they were known, had in the past been very dangerous and often violent. Dealing with drunken hard cases is difficult at the best of times, dealing with them when they hate you and would kill you given the chance brings with it a whole new dimension. Troops previously would go in mob handed and occasionally they ended up as a riot. Jim had changed this, his method was to go with a minimum of men and use the pub doorman for protection.

When I talk about pubs in Andersonstown I'm not talking about your average quaint country hostelry selling good ale and pub food. They included on the "normal side" the lake Glen Hotel, a medium sized hotel with bar and restaurant. There were also two other respectable bars and two disco pubs, the Green Briar and the Club House (both these will get a mention later).

Then we had the New Felons club, to become a member of this establishment you had to have a criminal record for terrorist related offences or have been interned. Terry McDermots bar was an illegal-drinking den named in honour of a Republican martyr who'd blown himself up with a bomb. The Prisoners Dependants Fund bar was supposed to be there to raise money for imprisoned terrorists families but was a front for raising money for the Republican cause. All where totally ante British, the chances of a drink where nil, the chances of not getting out alive if you were not careful was high.

Going back to our method of protection, every pub had a doorman and the procedure was that he would stay close by my side and defuse any trouble from the locals before it started. Their incentive to protect me was the threat that if my live became in danger I would shoot the doorman first then the barman before any other troublemakers, it was a great incentive to them and it worked. Any stropy drunk or over passionate republican would be shut up in very short time before trouble began. We were on grudging first name terms with all the doormen who were convinced that Jim and then I held the rank of Major, so as a Sergeant I was know to the doormen and then by many other republicans as Major Geoff. Jim instructed me that on my first trip out without him, I was to make my presence know to all the doormen and barmen in no uncertain manner. I was to impose myself by threatening them with being shot if my life was endangered, which I did and I lived to tell the tale. Of course if any new doormen started work I'd have to go through the threatening routine again leaving them in no doubt that I would kill them if my life was threatened whilst in "their care".

So over the next four and a half months I went with three of my guys at least twice a day around all the bars. One guy stayed by our vehicle, one at the outer door, one at the inner door of the room I was in and me with the doorman inside. Our exits were covered, we were all prepared to fight our way out if necessary and usually were relieved when each visit was over.

Back to my initiation to Andersonstown. On our first drive around to orientate me to the TAOR we were flagged down by a man who looked very agitated, Jim tried to ignore him but finally he jumped out in front of us and we couldn't. He told us his truck had been hijacked and he thought a bomb put on board. The last thing we needed at this time was to become incident control for a bomb scare, we didn't have the manpower, only four of us and more to the point it was lunchtime. The first troops on the scene usually takes control of the situation till bomb disposal arrives, Jim called out the immediate standby troop who reluctantly took over from us and we went for our pie and chips. In the end as we suspected it was a hoax.

On my very first trip real trip into the estate with Jim we ran into an ambush. On this patrol it soon became very apparent that something was wrong, it was about 11-30 am and the Estate was deserted, not even a dog on the street. We rounded a corner, on this occasion in two striped down land rovers and there in the middle of the road was a post office van that had just been set on fire and we'd driven into what is known as a come on. The terrorists had got us into their killing ground. We couldn't speed through or turn around, we were sitting ducks in the middle of the estate. It's amazing how quickly you can get out of a vehicle and how small you can make yourself when you know there are gun men about. We lay in our defensive position scouring the scores of windows and other possible firing point but couldn't see anything. We'd reported in and asked for back up to help to cover us as we extracted ourselves from a very difficult position. After what seemed like a lifetime, probably 10 minutes, it came as a troop in pigs to secure the perimeter and our exit route and we extracted ourselves. People soon came back out onto the streets, the dogs came out and continued their routine of chasing and trying to bite us and we went back to base for a debrief and lunch. How had we got away with it? Good training and quick reactions, there's no doubt we'd been set up but we'd reacted too quickly and effectively for them to take a chance of hitting us without taking casualties themselves.

It was probably that same night that Jim took me on my first Pub checks to meet the doormen and introduce me to the routine that was to take over my life for the next 4 months. The evening started well with no particular incidents, I will admit however that I was nervous, our training in Germany for pub checks was difficult and in some cases extreme, but I soon settled in. At Terry Mc Dermots bar I met the doorman Eddie Brophy, it was to be a short relationship with him, He was arrested for murder a couple of weeks later. I was told that he'd planted a bomb that had killed a significant number of people including children at a hotel party. Our last port of call was The Green Briar disco pub. I met the land lord later who told me that on a good night he would get 250-300 people in, that night was a good night. Jim took me into the main disco area and it was throbbing with disco music and a crowded dance floor, over the music he asked if I fancied a chat with the DJ. Then as bold as brass he pushed his way through the crowd towards him, the music stopped and everyone just stared at us. The DJ wasn't very communicative, the crowd hostile and our doorman escort nervous, so calm as you like we left and returned to base. Johnny Rushton our Squadron Sergeant Major had just arrived in camp that evening, he took one look at me and asked if I'd seen a ghost. I must admit that I thought it had been foolhardy and we learned later that something else happened. Within 30 minutes of us leaving the Green Briar an IRA active service unit fully armed were in there giving the customers a talk on what would happen to them if they co-operated with the Brits, execution!

I, over the coming four months would do on average around fifty pub checks a week, most without incident but a few worth mentioning. My very first one in charge of the party was on the Lake Glen Hotel, now the door into the bar area was on a very stiff return spring and took a real push to open it. On that night and it wouldn't surprise me if Jim had not warned them, the spring was removed. I gave it an almighty push to make my first appearance on my own and it flew open, smashed into the wall and I heard a voice say "watch out its f...ing John Wayne" It took the shine off my attempt to look cool and hard.

I should say now that I sometimes wonder how the lads who accompanied me on these visits felt. We were very exposed, thin on the ground, at times in real danger yet I don't remember any complaints and none chickened out! I don't think any of us realised what the routine would be when we were given the Job, we could even have been forgiven for thinking it was an office job. Far from it, I would guess that many in the Int Cell spent more time out on the ground than most in the squadron. Travelling constantly as a four man team when 8 man teams was the norm, in hindsight took guts. I'll be for ever grateful to those lads who watched my back especially in some of the more crowded and dangerous drinking haunts we visited. I wonder if they thought me quite mad, the risks we took?

Having said that most of our visits and that could be as many as ten a day, went quietly but there were exceptions.

The Clubhouse and the Green Briar were both on the northern edge of our area, they were both accessed by a single narrow lane, next to a gypsy camp, with only one way in and out. This made it a great spot for an ambush or EID. Add to that at the bottom of the lane on the other side of the gypsy camp was Terry McDermott's bar, an illegal republican-drinking Hut. The Clubhouse was originally going to be the clubhouse for a golf driving range, however, they never got around to building the range. One positive aspect of the checks was these bars often feature very good groups who played loud and long for the clientele. If they were particularly good we'd sometimes hang around for a while to listen to them. The door man of the club house (his name slips my memory) was a know republican and player who insisted on frisking every one who entered the bar including me. I played along with this but held onto my pistol and reinforced my threat to him if his hands moved anywhere near it.

Two incidents spring to mind at the club house the first one mid afternoon. One of the lads was rummaging around and found a loose stone on the car park wall, he removed it, saw a package which turned out to be a pistol. In fact it was a replica pistol wrapped in polythene and weighted to feel like the real thing. What was truly disturbing was we also found a command wire and battery that almost certainly was being set for an EID on the track leading to the bar. It's reasonable to believe that the pistol was a come on to get us into the area and then BOOM!!!

The Second incident was on a Friday night, we'd just arrived to check the place when a black cab arrived driven by a young man. I was immediately suspicious, he was too young to be a taxi driver and said he was driving it for a friend. There were two young women as passengers who I could not search or detain and had to let enter into the club. In hindsight I wish I hadn't. I was in the process of arresting the driver when we heard over the radio that a proxy car bomb had been delivered to the main gate of Woodburn Camp. The IRA tactic was to kidnap the driver's family, load a bomb into the car and tell the driver where to place it and if he refused, he threat was to kill his family. As you would imagine this caused major problems at Woodburn and nobody was interested in my suspect. One of their problems was nobody could find the back gate key for the base and they couldn't get out to deal with the problem which turned out to be a hoax. Eventually we got our suspect to Regimental INT and thought that was the end of it. The next night a group of masked men entered the Club house took some poor soul out of the audience sat him on a stool at the bar, convicted him of some misdemeanour and in front of the crowds shot his knees off.

I was really furious when I found out and set about to tackle our friendly doorman who'd allowed them in with a gun. He seemed a bit cocky and fairly pleased with himself when I arrived, but not for long. I asked him how the gun got in, he just smiled but that stopped when I drew my pistol, put the barrel up his nose, lifted enough to get him on his tip toes and told him that if the opportunity arose I'd take great pride in shooting him. Just then Scouse indicated that I should look behind me, it was then I noticed that we had a large audience watching me issuing my threats. The two young women the previous night, we think, were taking the gun into the clubhouse and I just happened to be there. The proxy bomb which turned out to be a hoax was to distract us while the punishment shooting took place. About a month later I was told by Regimental Int that the taxi driver was to be arrested, I took great pleasure in knocking on his door early one morning, saying to him remember me? And then taking him into the special branch HQ in Belfast.

The White Fort was another drinking haunt for the hard core republicans, we considered it to be the Head Quarters of the local Provo Battalion. Two specific checks stand out for me the first being a total surprise and a real eye opener. I had been reading a book called the Devils Guard about the Indo China war. When I finished it I left it for others to read in our Regimental Int cell. On the particular afternoon in question we checked the White Fort and sat at one table were a group of known players. I did the usual "P" check on them, I knew exactly who most of them were but as I've said it was the game we played. It went along the lines of; What's your name, What's your address? We'd get the usual answer, why ask, you know who we are, followed by me, shut up it's me who is asking the questions! We'd then go onto the unknown person and ask why are you mixing with him it'll only get you hassle etc. Then I noticed that the main player was reading a book, The Devils Guard, not only that it was my book, I could tell with the marks on the cover. I took it out of his hands, told him he shouldn't be reading crap like that and threw it back on the table. It would appear we'd turned one of their leaders. The Int boys did not deny this when I challenged them about giving my book to a shit like that. I'll not name the person in question but I heard that he was killed later by his own side.

The other occasion worth a mention happened near the end of the tour my successor from The Household Cavalry had arrived with some of his lads. The road outside the White fort had been put out of bounds, I understand that there was firm intelligence that a shoot had been organised to take place on it. I think that our section, as the most regular users of that road, may have been the target. On the night in question we were showing our weekly movie in the Sergeants Mess so I'd completed my work early to

watch it. After a while the intercom went and I was required in the ops room, RHQ Ops were on the bat phone for me (scrambled Telephone). They tasked me to visit the White Fort and find out who was in. I told the duty officer no it's out of bounds and went back to my film. Five minutes later I was sent for again, it was the Ops officer with the same task. I told him no and he should speak to the Int officer who would confirm it was out of bounds. Five minutes later I was called again, it was the CO, and he said that he knew it was out of bounds and knew why, but he still wanted it checking. Obviously I was not going to refuse the CO and he wished me the best of luck and hung up. I know from talking to friends up in Regimental Int that they were furious with what they thought was an unnecessary risk. I organised back up from my trusty pal Steve Redhead with two bricks (four man teams) from his troop to secure the road junctions either side of the White Fort, but with care to stay out of sight of the main road. I then decided that we would take 2 vehicles, mine with my successor and his boss, the second with a mixture of his lads and mine.

My plan was that once Steve's lads were in place we could use a roundabout route that brought us opposite the Fort on the other side of the road. Once in position four of us go to the front door while the other four secured that junction. Someone was clearly on our side because it started to snow heavily as we left base and visibility dropped to about 75 metres. My Idea was we'd make a dash from our vehicles to the pub take cover by the front door, get our breath back and then walk in as bold as brass as if it was a normal night. We walked in and it was packed, then it was almost like a western movie, it went quiet and all eyes were on us. I'd never seen so many republican players in one place throughout the whole tour, they must have been having a reunion or social event. Needless to say I didn't do the "P" check routine, too many players and things were getting hairy. I probably said good evening or something equally inane smiled at all the known villains and left. I remember on the way out looking at my successor who probably looked like I did on my first visit to the Green Brier, crapping himself. On the way out of the door the new Ops officer asked if we should check the toilets, I think my answer was you f...ing check them if you want, we're off. We got outside to find the new boys milling around like idiots, having a chat, they still hadn't got it, just how dangerous it was. So much to their bosses shame I gave them a kick up the arse. Sadly that attitude continued and they lost couple of guys shortly after we left.

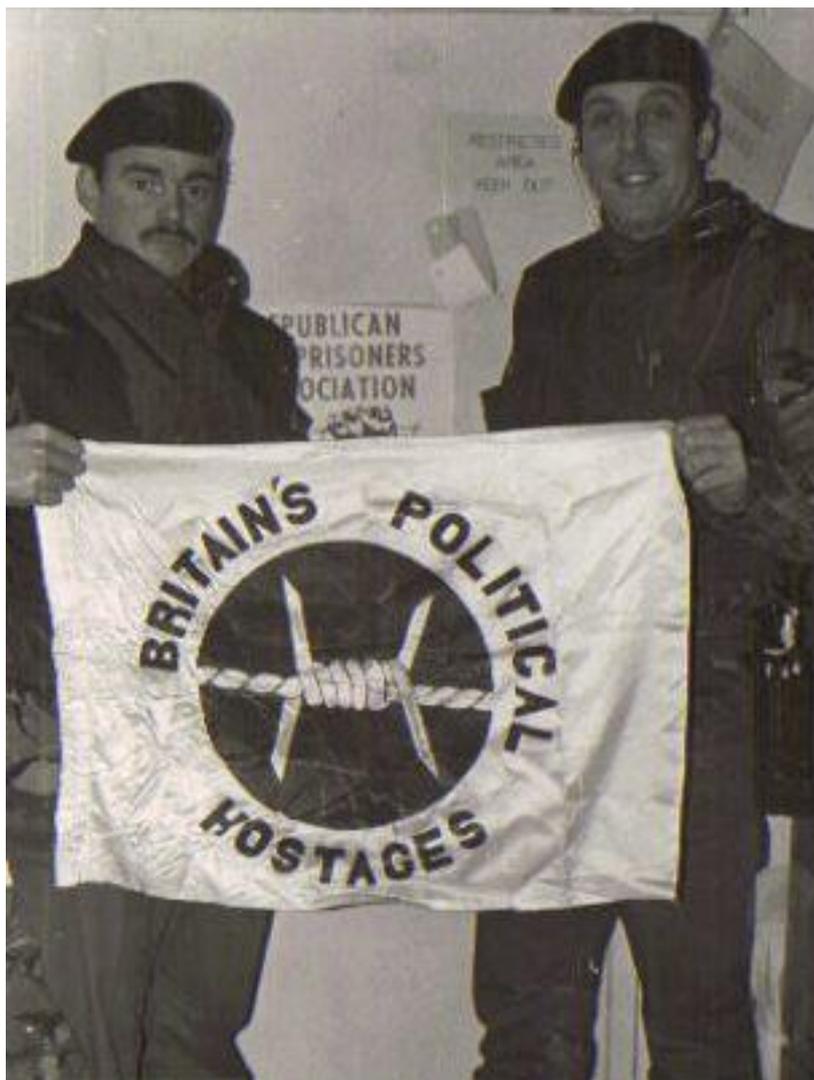
We all got back ok and I reported into Int on the bat phone and reeled of a long list of players I'd seen in there. They were as surprised as I was. About fifteen minutes later I was sent for again by Regimental Ops who asked me to go out again and check the Lake Glen Hotel. I don't know if it was a wind up or not, however, I told them to F... off and do it themselves if they were that anxious to know who was in there. Nothing more was said.

The hand over to me in Belfast also included the art of "rubber dicking" or to use civilian language practical joking, it genuinely helped to keep us sane and take our minds off the routine stresses of constant patrolling with its inherent dangers. It went on with great effect for the rest of our tour and well beyond. No one was safe, nothing too sacred to be hit and as a result life in Andersonstown became "interesting" in all its aspects. The Sergeant's mess also ran what we called the gumball rally. That involved having to carry on your person, but not attached in any way or in a wallet a small nylon washer. Any of the mess members could "gumball" you at any time, anywhere, by producing their gumball and you had to produce yours. The rule was that you had to be able reach your gumball without moving your feet. The penalty if you couldn't produce it was a pound in the beer kitty. This was totted up at weekend and beer distributed accordingly. Gumballs would appear under the toilet door, out on patrol, I even got Al Beverage as he was forming a cordon for a bomb incident anything was fair game, it was great to see him fumble inside his flack Jacket to find his gumball.

As a moment of slight relief it worth mentioning some of the classic rubber dick that will live as legends in the practical joking world. Simple ones like nailing someone beret to the desk and the crashing them out to an incident where good as was nailing their boots to the floor but many were much more devious. It is said that Al Knowles stored his Pee up in large coke bottles for a week before filling the water bucket up inside the sauna. The result was magnificent, pee on hot coals in a confined space and the sight of the occupants running out, their eyes stinging with the ammonia outstanding.

On one patrol I drove passed a dead dog in the road, on my second pass I decided to remove it and put it in a black plastic bag, they were usually used if we'd had a terrorist find. I was on my way to Sleepy Hollow (HQ Sqn SHQ) at the time. On my arrival Al Knowles saw the bag and a bit excitedly thought I'd had a find. I played along and showed him, to find he was a bit squeamish and fished up chasing him around the base with the dead dog. I finally put the body of the dog in the skip, but got a large piece of raw liver from the cook house, cut it into strips, found Al's bed and put it just where his feet would go. Great Joke, but, a week later I was out on patrol, it was wet and my fingers inside my gloves felt sticky. Al Knowles had got me back, he'd cut very thin strips of liver and fed it into each finger of my gloves.

There were many more examples including replacing shampoo with brake fluid and even in one case replacing tooth paste with athletes foot cream. One more I will mention is a classic committed by I understand Alan Smith our head of search teams. John Rushton, our Sergeant Major every Friday had a large Victoria sponge cake brought into the mess by the cleaning woman. This he would eat at Saturday lunch time, sharing it with his friends. Late Friday night I returned from a patrol with ace rubber dicker Jim Adamson, we went into the kitchen to make an egg banjo for supper and there in the fridge was the cake! My Idea was simple, eat it and replace it with slop from the bin, Jim thought differently and opened the box to tamper with it another way. Then to our surprise we found we'd been beaten to it and it was a cracker. Someone (Al) had take the top off the cake that was already cut in four, scooped out the centre of the cream leaving about ¼ of an inch all around the edge and filled the centre with Hot English mustard. Jim and me were often away at RHQ at Saturday lunchtime but made the effort to be back for this one. JR (Johnny Rushton) did not have the greatest sense of humour and this one was going to be worth watching. Sure enough the cake was produced for pudding and pieces handed out, not to Al or us. They bit into it and bimgo, reaction was again magnificent, Jim and me were branded the culprits and no pleading of innocence was going to be accepted. JR shut and locked the mess bar and told us all that it would remain shut until the culprits owned up. Little did he know but Jim had a spare key. JR always retired early and soon as he left Jim opened the bar.



With Jim Adamson showing our feelings.

The regiment produced a magazine each month called Ground Hawk that was a light hearted look at what we were doing. It was ok but very safe with the exception of issue one with a page three girl on the back. Sadly it was a little too safe. Our Int cell decided to produce its own magazine called Black Hawk that was anything but safe, in fact it was totally politically incorrect and offensive. This was circulated anonymously especially to its victims, mainly the echelon at sleepy hollow. It caused quite a stir in that organisation and there was talk of disciplinary action against the publishers. That was red rag to a bull and soon

Underground Hawk was published with its strap line "Smash Censorship". This was followed by a limited run of Sleepy Hollow Independent Times (look at the initials) and the much vaunted "fuck it" out of Woodburn. All these were a great laugh and along with rubber dicking made life much more fun.

An incident of note happened on our northern boundary at what we called the Bass Brewery, it was a bonded warehouse and distribution centre. The Provo's entered and set fire to the place but also set a booby trap for the security forces. It took the form of an explosive device to catch anyone entering to fight the fire. Unfortunately, against advice a fireman entered, it exploded and killed him. The aftermath was something entirely different. The stock in the warehouse was written off as fire damaged and gangs of men were employed to dump it into skips. The first hint we got was from our guys on guard at Sleepy Hollow. One of the Sangers overlooked the local tip and the guard noticed nurses from the hospital going back and forth to the tip with wheel chairs and on the return journeys they had boxes with them. It turned out that the booze was being dumped on our doorstep and the nurses were grabbing it. We soon put a stop to that by cordoning the area and getting a truck down there to collect as much as possible for our consumption. We found a second dump where the bottles were being taken and collected lots from there, the fact is we collected loads of the stuff. Every soldier going on leave from our squadron took a couple of bottles home with him, We sent a large load to the infantry platoon who'd worked with us as a Christmas box and had enough to supply all our needs for the rest of the tour. This was the second occasion I'd dealt with a bonded warehouse fire, the previous one in Newry on the last tour. It must be a gift for firemen all that booze. On the previous occasion we arrested a man wearing his brothers fireman's helmet and jacket, but with jeans and carpet slippers.

There is a saying about out of the mouths of babes that caused an unfortunate incident for one family. There had been a shooting incident at Andersonstown Police station and I had gone to take a look, to try to establish a firing point and collect any evidence. As we got near, on this occasion on foot, a little boy started to talk to me in the street and told me his dad had a rifle just like mine hidden in a wardrobe upstairs in his bedroom. I immediately asked for Al Smith assistance to search the house, he did and indeed found a rifle in the wardrobe. It was a toy one put there so his son would not play out with it and risk getting shot by mistake. We didn't have the heart to tell the family where the information that triggered the search came from.

On another occasion Regimental Int asked me if I could find a reason to search a house that they suspected was being used as a hide out for terrorists. I turned again to Steve Redhead for help and asked him to get his section to carry out a rummage search along the hedgerow to the rear of the house in question. The idea was he would drop some ammo in a bag in the hedgerow for his lads to find, it would not be enough to convict anyone of anything, but enough to enable us a hot pursuit and search the house in question. Sadly His lads missed the ammo and had to be sent back three times before they found it. When they finally found it he reported in, I ordered the hot pursuit, the search team went in and found the hiding place recently vacated in the loft. I got a call off the CO who was very suspicious of what had gone on to which I replied that I was only carrying out standard operating procedures as efficiently as I could. Steve did some arse kicking for the inefficiency of his lads on the rummage.

The general idea of our patrols was that we would control as far as possible when we patrolled and no patrol would go out without a specific task. The usual tasks were the collection of intelligence, arresting suspects, searches of areas or property or simply dominating an area to allow other operations to be completed.

I was asked by Regimental Int to find out who was living at a particular address. We knew the husband was in prison for terrorist related crimes and were keen to know if any other man had taken his place. The idea being the new man could be blackmailed and possibly be turned as an informant. I briefed a foot patrol to do the house check and told them what information I'd been asked to get. The patrol returned and on their debrief I asked how they got on and were there any men there? The patrol commander admitted it had gone a bit wrong and he'd no information. I asked what had happened and he told me that He'd knocked on the door and the women of the house answered, soon as she did one of his lads asked who's F.....ing you now your old mans in jail? Needless to say we didn't use them on any more sensitive jobs.

On another occasion one of our patrols "P" checked a suspicious looking individual. I was in the Int cell at the time and looked up the suspect's file to find that in the past he'd been knee capped in both legs. I radioed back that he should be limping, the patrol commander, who shall remain nameless, replied wilco (will co-operate) out. He came in for their debrief and said "don't worry he's limping now". To this day I'm not sure if it was a joke. The same commander decided to search the parents of one of our known players

on a dark cold night in the pouring rain. They were on their way back from the supermarket loaded with shopping, which he meticulously searched by tipping it out onto the pavement. I was asked by the Police Sergeant to attend the police post, where he told me that the couple concerned had turned up at our base (unheard of before) asking to speak to Major Geoff to make a complaint. The Police Sergeant didn't know that I like my predecessor was known as Major. Any way I went to speak to them, it was time to pour oil on troubled water with the parents and do some arse kicking on over zealous patrol commanders.

It is easy to forget that the majority of people living in these hard republican areas simply want a quiet life. One of the strangest invitations was to go out to tea in the middle of the estate. I accepted the offer but of course this came with a risk to me, could it be a come on and a risk to them as collaborators if it was genuine invitation. I decided to take the risk and called once again for Steve Redhead to back me up. It was a dark night and Me and one other Joined Steve's two bricks and walked into the area. Once we got near the house in question we split, removed our belts and berets, untucked our trousers from our boots, concealed our weapons and walked to the host's house. In the dark we did not stand out and we enjoyed a very pleasant tea (having said that I watched everybody eat from the sandwiches and drink from the pot before I did, they weren't going to poison me).

I was Given Christmas R&R which I spent in Germany with Lorraine. I flew home the day before Christmas Eve and back the day after Boxing Day. One touching moment was a BFBS broadcast from Ireland with my Christmas dedication to Lorraine, Mamma's and Papa's singing this is dedicated to the one I love. I think it was Trevor Gill who appeared on tele and told the viewing public that I was jamy enough to get Christmas off. It started to snow heavily on Boxing Day and my heart soared, thinking we'd be snowed in. No such luck, this is Germany and RAF Transport Command, they'd get us back ok. New Year's Eve was spent between the offices and sergeants messes. My pal Ron, of Forkhill fame, came over and we had a grand time, We watched Meat Loaf sing love by the dashboard light live on the television and eat for the first time whole dried bananas, now that was memorable.



The Int Cell Christmas card sent to our known players, the reverse reads Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year D Squadron 14/20 Kings Hussars

The tour ended, thankfully with us all in one piece, nerves pretty shredded but we were all working better together than ever before. We truly learned what comradeship is and how to rely on our mates. For me it was the best tour and probably one of the best jobs I have ever done.

Statistics in 1978 there were 748 Bombings, 755 Shootings, 21 Soldiers, 10 Police officers, 43 civilians and 10 terrorists killed.

What next ever?

It was great that we all returned home safely from the tour, something I think we all doubted would happen. The Princess Anne paid us a visit and a regimental parade was organised in her honour. The weekend she arrived and was staying at the CO's house, I was sent for mid afternoon. I had no idea why and no one warned the security detail that I was coming. The bullet stoppers challenged me as I went down the garden path to the CO's house. I was introduced to Her Majesty and told I was to receive a General Officer Commanding Northern Ireland commendation for the work I had done. Lt later General Sherreff was also to receive a commendation and the CO a mention in despatches. No body told me why I had been given this award, it was not the done thing.

Because we were out of Ireland it did not mean that the threat ceased. We and our families had to be constantly alert to the terrorist threat. The regiment returned from Germany to Cattertick in North Yorkshire as Royal Armoured Corps training Regiment where I was to be RSM. They then returned to Munster in Germany but I was given a commission and posted to the Queens Own Yeomanry in Newcastle Upon Tyne as their admin officer. Shortly before I was to return to Regimental duty some two years later there was a very nasty incident.

A car had stopped at the side of the road near our barracks and the occupants asked two of our off duty soldiers if this was the main road to the town centre. When they answered in English a gunman opened fire in an attempt to kill them. Fortunately our doctor was having a meal in a restaurant opposite and was quickly on the scene to save their lives.

A few weeks later I was back with the regiment and was out for a run. I went down the side of our barracks through some woods and I saw a man coming towards me, who immediately raised my suspicions. He had a high power camera around his neck and by his dress and demeanour was not a German. It was too late to turn back and as I got near him his right hand went quickly inside his Jacket. My first thought was he's going for a gun, my second was you've got to brazen this out. So I spoke to him in my best but very limited German. He relaxed and instead of a gun produced a packet of cigarettes, Embassy. I ran on at the same pace till I passed him then sprinted to the nearest gate to call out the armed guard to intercept him. Unfortunately when they arrived he'd gone and I reported the incident to the RMP. Next day I was sent for to look at mug shots and they showed me an artist's impression that matched exactly the man I'd seen. It transpired it was a picture of an IRA man who'd planted bombs and shot a soldier in a neighbouring garrison. I breathed a sigh of relief that I'd got away with it and thought no more about it till about 2 years later. By then I was a civilian working in Leeds, my co worker read the Sun newspaper every day and on this particular day I caught a glance of it and there looking back at me was a photograph of the man from the woods. He'd just been found guilty of murdering a reserve constable over in Yorkshire and sentenced to life in prison.

A few years later I was working out of an office in central Manchester and had to help clear the mess in our offices after the IRA had planted a huge bomb in the city centre. I must say that the damage I witnessed there dwarfed anything I'd seen in Ireland. It took 45 minutes to walk around the inner cordon after the bomb exploded. This was the third attack and on the previous two occasions the staff had evacuated passed the bomb one of which went off minutes later. I was given the job of writing a new office evacuation procedure, my time in Ireland stood me in good stead for that. Both Lorraine and I would carry out security checks on our cars before we got in them for the best part of five years after leaving the Army, old habits die-hard.



The Old and Bold cross country team including RQMS (T), self, QM and Tech Sgt, post the regimental cross country race. We weren't last we beat the wives club team.

Commendation; Northern Ireland Routine order dated 2 Jul 79 Issue 25

Sgt Hutchinson has been D Squadron Intelligence Office with responsibility for the Andersonstown and Riverdale areas of West Belfast during the Regiment's present operational tour. This is the fourth occasion that he has served in the province. It was only possible for him to undergo a minimum of intelligence training prior to his arrival in Northern Ireland because of other commitments in Germany. Nevertheless he has carried out his job with outstanding diligence far in excess of what is normally expected from someone of his experience. His enthusiasm and energy have been reflected in the organisation he has evolved in Intelligence Section at Glassmullen Camp, and his leadership of this small section in interpreting events of an intelligence nature has been an example throughout the Regiment's tactical area of responsibility.

After a relatively short period as Squadron Intelligence Officer, his cell became both competent and productive. At the same time, but not entirely part of his brief, he made great strides to improve community relations throughout the area: with the high level of intimidation in Andersonstown, this was no easy task. He has however established an excellent relationship with all levels of the population and has gained their trust and confidence by his common sense, tact and firm handling of the many trouble makers that he came into contact with in the course of his duties.

His knowledge and recognition of the 1st Battalion of the Provisional IRA is noteworthy. This has been built up by exceptional work and very frequent visits to all the public houses and drinking clubs in the area. With minimum protection and at great personal danger to himself he would visit these establishments at all hours of the day and night to get maximum information about the known terrorists. In doing this, not only has the attrition rate against the Provisional IRA increased, but he has earned their grudging respect and prevented their freedom to manoeuvre.

His liaison with the Royal Ulster Constabulary has again been excellent and despite the constraints imposed by a short tour, he has been of great assistance to their own intelligence gathering machinery within the Sub Division. He has therefore been significant in improvement in Police and Military co-operation within the Brigade area which is essential to operational success.

Sgt Hutchinson's performance in Northern Ireland has been exceptional. His personal contribution in the field of intelligence, community relations and support of the Royal Ulster Constabulary has been outstanding and now merits recognition.

Post script



The author looking significantly older than in the first picture in this booklet.

I Joined the Army a Junior Trooper in the Junior Leaders Regiment Royal Armoured Corps in September 1964. I retired with the rank of Major, Commanding Head Quarter Squadron 14th/20th Kings Hussars in June 1992. During that time I had the honour of serving with some of the best men this country could produce and will always look back with pride at our achievements. It is now a distant memory just how tense the situation was in Europe during the 1960's. There was a very real possibility of Soviet action against the west that would almost inevitably have led to nuclear war. As young tank crewmen we took the threat seriously and were well prepared to fight against the odds to defend freedom. Then to add to our burden the Northern Ireland conflict erupted and that governed much of ours and our family's lives for over 20 years. Indeed one of our Regimental wives, Mrs Veronica Eadsforth lost part of her foot in an IRA bombing incident in London.

However this book is not meant to be about self, rather it's a snapshot of the life and times, seen through my experiences, which many of our soldiers and our families endured serving through those troubled years. I have not mentioned many of the lads by name because I feel it would not be right to do so without asking them, they know who they are. Those I have mentioned, I hope it's ok and I got it right. There are of course many other incidents that my troop dealt with and score upon score that other troops and squadrons dealt with.

It was not the last active services that I and these lads saw, the Regiment deployed in 1990 on Operation Granby, more commonly known as the First Gulf War. There we took to the desert to fight the war that we'd trained for over many years as "tankies". Since leaving the Regiment and it's amalgamation it's staggering to know just how much active service the lads have carried out. Many a chest now carries far more campaign medals than we'd have ever thought of; but there lies another story.

