

A Gunner in the Gorse

At the tender age of 18, RMARG member John Cummings was 'called to the colours'. Circumstances demanded that he become qualified to jump out of perfectly serviceable aircraft, i.e. he became a paratrooper. He recalls some unusual experiences during the course of his National Service..

These days, despite the availability of computers and technology, it probably wouldn't happen as it did, but back then almost everyone received their National Service call up papers promptly. Mine arrived within two weeks of my eighteenth birthday, and so, on the appointed day, I reported to the Slade Camp in Oxford. There, after being 'kitted out', I spent six weeks with lots of other youths being yelled at, drilling, boot polishing, uniform pressing and all the other unfamiliar tasks regarded as necessary to make us soldiers. It was a very effective way of shaking us out of our slovenly civilian habits and getting us reasonably fit. Years later, people talked about the stodgy food provided for National Servicemen, but after experiencing the rationing of the war years, I thought the food was not too bad, especially as all the unaccustomed exercise sharpened our appetites.

Having completed our square bashing, we were allocated to our various regiments; I was given a railway pass and ordered to report to the Royal Artillery Barracks in Dover. There, I joined a group of other recruits and began learning the operation of (I think) five different calibres of artillery pieces. There were lots of former anti-aircraft sites in that area, and we practised setting up our guns on some of them. Handling and manoeuvring large guns and ammunition required skill and practise, and once we'd mastered the rudiments and begun to work as teams, we managed to meet the time requirements laid down. We even began to consistently land our shells somewhere near the target! Very soon a sense of pride crept in, contrary to all our expectations. Most of us rather enjoyed the experience, and after a while began to feel that we were becoming capable soldiers. There was no doubt that practising with man-size guns and riding in their towing vehicles was much preferable to crawling around in the mud with a puny rifle and a great heavy pack on your back.

We used to fire 25-pounders from the St Margaret's Bay firing range outside Dover, at targets fitted on floating platforms out in the Channel. We were amused on one occasion at the arrival of a very anxious Battery Commander, who ordered us to cease firing immediately as a small fishing boat had wandered into our target area. By that time, we'd become prac-

tised enough to have hit the vessel if it came near our targets! Although we frequently fired blank shells, sometimes (as on this occasion) we used live rounds and we thought the fisherman was probably trying to collect fish that had been killed by our efforts.

For me, the joy of this corner of Shangri-La came to an abrupt end with the arrival of another set of dreaded 'Orders'. To my surprise, I was told to report to the Airborne Forces depot in Aldershot. Apparently, I'd been volunteered for Airborne Service, although someone had forgotten to tell me about it.

Actually, this wasn't so bad, as I was mad about aeroplanes, and I thought I was to be taught how to land with artillery in gliders. I was quite happy at the prospect of floating around in the sky without engines, and regarded this posting as rather appealing. There was also the attraction of extra pay (such as it was) for 'hazardous duty'. In the event, I found myself undergoing 'Para Training'.

Slade Barracks was nothing compared to this - two weeks of hard physical effort, mornings in the gym, afternoons on the assault course, and that was only the



'There was great enthusiasm from 'On High' for dropping small groups of paratroops from pods fitted beneath an aircraft's wings. Obviously, this would enable paradrops from almost any plane, especially naval aircraft flown from carriers. This rare photo shows a 1945 test at Beaulieu using a Fairey Barracuda equipped with a one-man pod beneath each wing.

beginning. Then it was on to No 1 Parachute School at Upper Heyford. Here, the physical training was reduced slightly, to allow time to learn how to jump from great heights with a parachute. After two jumps from a tethered balloon at Weston-on-the-Green, we graduated to jumps from Dakota aircraft. A lot of recruits didn't make it through this very demanding regime, which we felt was designed to give the survivors a sense of pride and achievement, and it certainly did. Those of us that completed eight jumps without injuring ourselves were awarded our 'wings' and became 'paras'. By this time, we were 'cock of the walk', unrecognisable from the callow youths that had reported for duty a few short months before.

After passing out from the Parachute School, I was posted to the 33rd Airborne Artillery Regt. in Rendsburg, northern Germany. There the army had taken over a large former German Army barracks, which was very comfortable. We didn't have much to do with the local people, but it was obvious to us that we were much better off than most of them. I was looking forward to spending the rest of my service time with this unit, but the powers that be had other ideas. Within a few weeks, I was posted back to the UK, to RAF Beaulieu in the New Forest, having signed the dreaded piece of paper declaring that I was prepared to 'jump from any plane at whatever height, with any type of parachute'. So that was that.

I soon found myself among a 30-40 strong detachment of 'paras' at what had become the Airborne Forces Experimental Establishment. In effect we were live dummies, testing all kinds of new equipment related to dropping paratroops. One series of tests was to discover the minimum length of static line that could safely be used. The idea was, of course, to enable drops to be made at the lowest reasonable height, so as to get paratroops onto the ground as quickly as possible, and reduce the length of time when they would be exposed to ground fire. The two types of aircraft that I was mainly connected with were the Handley Page Hastings and the new Vickers Valetta, a twin-engined aircraft about the size of a Dakota.

The Valetta was a pleasant aeroplane from which to jump, but I always tried to avoid being one of the first six aboard, as it meant clambering over the main spar - no mean task when you have a parachute on your back and full kit bag strapped to your leg! On this type of aircraft, exits were made from the port side, but it was found (the hard way for some unfortunates) that many parachutes were wrapping themselves around the port tailplane. Eventually, a rail was installed on the underside of the tailplane to prevent these mishaps.

The Hastings appeared to be quite a large, modern aircraft after the Dakotas and Halifaxes that we had used in our early training at Upper Heyford. It was the first aircraft to employ the double-door exit method, the doors on the port and starboard sides being staggered along the fuselage, the port one being nearer the tail. We jumped from aircraft serial number TG499 in sticks of 30, 15 from each side. At that time we

were testing a coiled spring device intended to reduce the jolt of the kit bag when it reached the end of the rope after being released from the leg. We made quite a few jumps during this test, and in the course of these, we invented a new game - parachute walking. Jumping close together with static release cords resulted in our parachutes opening quite close to each other, and often we could actually stand on the canopy of one of the jumpers ahead of us. This soon developed into a competition to see how many we could walk on before we reached the ground. Of course, the 'chutes we used in those days were not as controllable as modern ones, so this game involved a large measure of luck or foolhardiness. But in those days we were indestructible.

A drop zone had been allocated for our use, an area covered in heather and gorse on the other side of the Beaulieu-Lymington road from the airfield. During one particularly windy demonstration, several of us were dragged through this area by our 'chutes and finished up in the base hospital to have gorse splinters removed from our arms and legs - very painful. On another occasion, I came down on the roof of the general store in the nearby village of Boldre. Sliding from the roof, I landed in a heap on the concrete in front of the shop, embarrassed, but uninjured. The shopkeeper rushed out to see if I'd been hurt. Cheekily, I asked if he had a couple of aspirins as I had a headache!

An official photographer, who flew alongside in a Fairey Firefly, filmed all parachute test drops. We sometimes seemed to spend long periods stooging around while the two aircraft got themselves into the right position. Some tests had to be repeated several times because the film recording didn't come out properly. We soon created several very uncomplimentary nicknames for the photographers, although it didn't matter to us how many times we had to jump. As experimental parachutists we always carried an emergency 'chute, and all descents were made from 2,000ft. On one occasion, having jumped from the plane, I watched it flying away from me with men streaming out of both sides. One man, by the name of Morgan, hurtled earthwards and I didn't see his white emergency 'chute open before he disappeared below the tree line. I thought we'd seen the last of him and was surprised when he turned up later, apparently none the worse for his close shave. It qualified him for member-



A confident John Cummins fully 'chuted up', obviously before he was dragged through the gorse!



A 'stick' of paratroopers, probably including John Cummings, jumping from Hastings TG499.

ship of the Caterpillar Club, an event we later celebrated in traditional fashion.

When the weather was fine, we sometimes did two or three jumps a day, but often there were days on end when conditions were unsuitable for testing. On those days, we'd spend the mornings in the gym, on the small arms firing range, or slogging around the wettest parts of the New Forest with full kit. There was a great sense of camaraderie amongst our bunch, and we would spend hours dreaming up our own nicknames for the latest piece of test equipment or challenging each other to perform some hare-brained stunt.

At Beaulieu the RAF flew from mid-day Monday to lunchtime on Friday, which meant we had a 72-hour pass every weekend, which suited us fine. It was a rather unique airfield, as it appeared to have an example of just about every aircraft the RAF had, and there were all sorts of tests going on. On flying days an assortment of planes would take to the air while we were boarding or waiting our turn at the end of the runway. I can recall seeing a flatbed truck motoring at speed along the main runway with a one-man autogyro-type rotating wing tethered to it. To the astonishment of the onlookers, the pilot managed to get this unlikely contraption up to about 30ft above the truck in what I thought was quite a hair-raising flight. I never saw any other trials of this strange craft, so I think the tests were not a huge success.

The Navy had a small detachment of about 20 men on the airfield, but we never did find out exactly what they were doing there - in those days nobody knew anything about the SAS or the Navy's SBS.

Obviously, with such a small distance between each, accidents such as John describes were likely.

One sunny day we took part in Exercise Mafisto. This was a jump over Netheravon, about 25 miles north of Beaulieu, and was to be a demonstration in front of a number of high-ranking officers. On this occasion I jumped number five from the starboard side and collided with number five from the port side, whose name I believe was Young. I went through his rigging several times, ending up with lines around my neck, legs and arms and his helmet in the small of my back. I tried to untangle myself, but on seeing my parachute flapping

limply by the side of his, which was fully opened, I decided to stay where I was. This was probably a wise decision and one that saved both our lives. We landed heavily in a heap, with my landing being cushioned by the unfortunate Private Young, who was lucky to be only winded. After what seemed an age, two RAF chaps came running to the rescue and eventually untangled us. Neither of us had a scratch on us, and Young soon recovered his breath, although both of us were a bit shaken by the experience. Getting tangled up in other people's 'chutes immediately after exit appeared to happen from time to time with the Hastings, not always with such a fortunate outcome.

Occasionally, I spent time watching dummies being dropped from Halifaxes, testing the newly developed barometric 'chutes, but the tests didn't seem to go too well. It was also rumoured that a cylindrical container capable of holding six men was to be dropped from the bomb bay of a Halifax, but I never actually saw any sign of this.

Life at Beaulieu wasn't all a matter of risking your neck on some airborne scheme, and we had ample time to come up with ways of making life easier for ourselves. We were billeted about a mile from the mess, and as we had no transport, we had to make our way there on foot, which was a bit of a bind in the wet. During a period of no-flying weather, a number of us had a session of rummaging over the scrap heap and came up with enough parts to put together 8 or 9 bicycles, none of which had brakes or chains. From then on, we made our way back and forth to the mess in a long train, towed behind one of the lads on a motorbike. It was a bit surprising that some officer type didn't put a stop to this, but I suppose it was thought that we para's were all mad anyway, and best left to our own devices. Meanwhile, a Scottish bloke in our group managed to break in a New Forest pony, which he rode everywhere. He had no saddle and just a halter made of gash bits of webbing, rather him than me! It was a rather bad-tempered beast and would bite anyone else that approached it. I suppose it returned to its carefree way of life after he departed.

During our spare time we often watched some of the other goings-on at Beaulieu. There was an Avro Anson practising mail snatching from 'goal posts', using a large hook under the fuselage. I think the pilot must have been a habitual drinker as he flew so low that we thought the hook would catch in the ground and drag the plane to destruction - surely we thought, no sober pilot would risk life and limb like that just for a few mailbags.

We thought at the time that we had the best life the Army could offer, but it was too good to last. In any case, my two-year stint in uniform was drawing to a close. After about a year at Beaulieu, I was posted back to the Airborne Forces depot at Aldershot. For about two weeks, I painted just about every non-moveable item at the Depot. Talk about exciting! Few people could have been as pleased as I was to receive my discharge papers. Considering all the stunts I'd got away with, it was astonishing that I re-entered "Civvy Street" a confident young man with some happy memories, and without a blemish on my record.