Reminiscences of Army Life

By "Steelback"

CHAPTER 17

We had one casualty while we were stationed at Fleetwood. The barracks, or huts, were facing the road leading to Russell College.

The back of the huts were towards the sea. Looking across the water at night we could see the lights from Barrow-in-Furness, and, if the wind was in the right direction, we could hear the sound of steam hammers at night time.

Continuing on past Russell College we would come to Blackpool.

Blackpool is now, and has been for years, a well known seaside resort, but at the time I speak of, there was nothing there but the "Winter Gardens".

On the west side of the huts was the rifle range. In the rear of the huts was a sandy waste then the sea. With the exception of a little military cemetery everything was loose sand. This means that the sea was west and north of us. On the north side the coast line has a peculiar formation. Standing on the shore facing directly north, a deep gully would be noticed leading directly back to the town of Fleetwood, and the mouth of the river Wyre. On the far side of the gully was a huge stretch of sand and then the sea. This would be the situation when the tide was out. The gully would be practically dry. When the tide came in this gully would be filled, or nearly so, before the tide started across the sands. There was the situation, a situation to which we—a party of six, were entirely ignorant. We crossed the dry gully, and set out across the sands. We wandered on, and were getting close to the sea when someone shouted "The tide's coming in". It was. It came in like a race horse. Myself and three others set off in an easy double, the other two sauntering along as if there was no occasion for hurry. We arrived back at the gully to find it nearly full of water, but we got across.

The two we had left behind had to run to escape the incoming tide and when they got to the gully they found that they would have to swim for it. They entered the water fully dressed—as we all were—and the incoming tide tossed them here and there as they started to cross. Only one reached the shore. The loser in the desperate struggle for life made no outcry. He just disappeared. His body was found the next day near the mouth of the river at Fleetwood. He was buried in the little military plot at the back of the huts.

He was a fine young fellow, and I missed him very much. He was associated with me in organizing games to enliven our otherwise dreary existence, consisting, as it did, of parades, guards, picquets. The only diversion we got otherwise was when we went to church.

The pastor might have thought that he was very impressive but most of our faces were smiling during his sermon. He had a habit of patting his chest and the top of his head. It was really very funny to watch him.

We had been stationed at Fleetwood for three months when a batch of recruits were sent from Preston to join us. We little dreamed that one of their number was destined to be the life—so to speak—of our detachment. The name of this paragon of unconscious humour was Wallace. Straight-away he was dubbed by the remainder of the company—The last of the Wallace's.

CHAPTER 18

I must give the last of the Wallace's a chapter all to himself.

His absurdities covered a long period and many places, and he will appear again later on.

It is usual when a non-commissioned or private wishes to speak to an officer, to tell the Colour Sergeant that you desire to do so.

The Colour Sergeant will mention this to the Officer who will give time and place for the interview. This didn't bother Wallace at all. Instead of saying—Excuse me, Sir, may I do so and so, his request would start something like this.

"Can I have two shillings extra pay next pay day, I want to go to Blackpool". Not even saying "Sir".

He got extra drills, extra guards, confined to barracks for stated periods, but it did no good. He was hopeless. His replies to any questions put to him by an officer were off-hand. He was the best example of anyone that I had ever come in contact with who spoke, without thinking what he was going to say, or to whom he said it.

I give an instance. We were on parade one day at 11 a.m. The Colour Sergeant casually looked us over. The orderly sergeant called the roll. We were all present. The officer came along. I have spoken of him before as Lieut. G, and that he wore a monocle. The company was called to attention. The Colour Sergeant saluted and reported all present.

Lieut. G walked along the front rank, down the rear rank, then gave the command "Shoulder Arms". It was the long shoulder in those days, and the of shouldering arms in one movement requires a lot of practice before proficiency is obtained.

For the benefit of the un-initiated an explanation is in order.

The soldier stands to attention. Heels in line and closed. Toes turned out to an angle of 45 degrees. Knees straight. Body erect. Chin slightly drawn in but without constraint. Shoulders back, arms hanging loosely at the side. Hands partially closed. Thumb in line with the seam of the trousers.

We now give him a rifle. He takes it in his right hand places the butt on the ground with the toe of the butt (the toe of the butt is that part underneath the trigger guard) in line with the toe of the right foot, grasping the rifle with the right hand at the lower band, thumb between the stock and the trousers. From this position, on the command "Shoulder Arms" he throws the rifle across his body with the right hand, and catches the butt of the rifle in the left hand dropping the right hand smartly to the side. It will be seen by this that the movement is not simple until you know how to do it.

The next word of command is "Port Arms". To execute this movement the soldier seizes the small of the butt (this is just under the trigger guard) and brings the rifle in front of his body and grasps it at the lower band, the left hand being in line with his left shoulder. He places the thumb of his right hand in the loop of the lever and presses it down. This movement opens the breech (this is where the cartridges are placed when loading the rifle) and the examining officer is able to see whether the breech is clean.

The next order is "Examine arms". This movement is performed by the soldier making a partial turn to the right, carrying off his right foot a little, at the same time bringing his right hand in line with his waistbelt and his left arm in front, and close to his body, canting the rifle to a slanting position with the muzzle of the rifle in front. This enables the officer to look down the barrel to see if the barrel is clean. On this particular day the officer with the monocle, Lieut. G, was in the act of looking down the barrels. He arrived in front of Wallace, took hold of the muzzle of his rifle and peered down the barrel with his monocled eye. He was not satisfied with his first glace, and looked down the barrel again, then he looked at Wallace saying "My man, your rifle is dirty".

Any other man would have made no reply, but not so Wallace. Without any hesitation his reply came in a casual sort of way, "It's your window that's dirty."

To say that Lieut. G was astonished is really too mild. He was astounded. Never before had he been spoken to in that manner. For a few moments he stook looking at Wallace (who never blinked) then he said "Put this man in the guard room".

As Wallace was being escorted to the guard room he was heard to remark "Why he couldn't drill a couple of ducks."

We all heard what he said. He wasn't so far away. The Colour Sergeant told the orderly Sergeant to put two charges against Wallace. First, Insolence to an Officer. Second, Improper language concerning an Officer.

The following morning, I, and another man, were detailed as escort to the prisoners, amongst them was Wallace. Office hour was 10 a.m.

A Corporal marched us over to the guard room with the prisoners, two drunks and Wallace. We were marched to the Orderly Room. Halt. Right about turn. Stand at ease.

In a little while the acting Sergeant Major came to us, called us to attention and, taking off the prisoners hat, gave the command "Left turn." "Quick March". "Left Wheel". Halt. "Left turn". The Adjutant would have the crime sheet and would read the charge against the prisoners, calling in any evidence—for or against—after this the prisoners would be asked if they had anything to say.

The Major in command of the detachment was a straight-forward chap. He was just in his dealings with the men. And he wade it his business to know his men. Looking at Wallace (who, by the way, was looking at him) the Major said "You know that you shouldn't talk to an Officer like that, or even refer to him in the manner in which you did.

Your remark "Why he couldn't drill a couple of ducks" was an impudent remark and should be classed as insubordination.

Do you still believe that this officer can't drill a couple of ducks?

"Yes," replied Wallace.

The Major lost his temper, and rising up in his chair, roared at Wallace, "Say Sir, damn you, when you speak to me." But Wallace could not say "Sir".

Take him away, said the Major. I'll see him tomorrow.

The following morning Wallace was again at the orderly room, he was marched in and stood to attention. The Major looked at him quietly, and said "Well Wallace, you've had time to consider what you said yesterday. Have you changed your mind?"

"Yes," said Wallace, and quietly, when he saw the Major getting up, added the "Sir."

"Ah," said the Major, "I thought that another few hours in the guard room would make you change your mind. You said that the officer couldn't drill a couple of ducks. What do you think now?"

Wallace didn't bat an eye. At once came his answer. "I don't think he could drill one."

Can you imagine this? I was biting my lips to keep from laughing, and I wasn't the only one. Funny? I should say it was funny. The Major said "Seven days cells".

Away we went to the guard room, and we could hear the officers in the Orderly Room having their little laugh over the affair.

Seven days cells. There doesn't appear anything of a startling nature in the sentence, but I will explain what this means and let you be the judge.

In all barracks, or camps, there is a guard. In camp the various units take it in turn to provide the Main Guard, and each unit provides its own regimental guard.

There are no cells in camp and cells as a punishment is not awarded. To make the punishment fit the crime the prisoner would be sent to the detention camp. This is a barbed wire enclosure, with sentries patrolling on the outside of the fences. There are tents for the accommodation of the prisoners, and every consideration is shown for his health.

In barracks the main guard is by the entrance gate. This is No. 1 post. If there are two sentries, there would be two posts to patrol. In this case there was only one post. Attached to the guard room were three cells. These cells were eight feet long, four feet wide. A window, twelve inches by ten inches in the back wall, and well out of reach, gave light in the day time. This window, and the cell door, were barred. The bed, a wooden one, was fastened to the wall in the daytime out of the way and let down at night. There were no conveniences. The prisoner ate his meals there. The meals were not noted for their extravagance. They consisted of soup, porridge (very thin) bread, water, tea, coffee, potatoes, meat, salt, pepper. These articles were given to the prisoner in as great a variety as possible. He didn't get the same kind of material twice in one day. The prisoner got up at reveille, washed, dressed, made up his bed, cleaned out his cell, then breakfast.

Attached to the cells is the exercise yard. Ten feet square, with high walls of brick around it, and a cement floor. It had no roof. In the centre of the floor was a barred drain to carry off the excess water. In the wall is a stoutly made door leading to the cells. On the floor, in each corner of the exercise yard, is a block of hard wood. twelve inches by six inches. Each of these blocks of wood had an indentation on their upper surface, and each of these are about one inch deep and six inches across. On one of these blocks of wood reposes a twenty pound iron shot. It has a very inoffensive appearance at first sight, but a longer acquaintance dispels idea, and believe me, any association that a soldier prisoner has with the twenty pound shot, remains long in his memory. Having excited your curiosity, I will proceed to allay it. The provost sergeant, or his assistant, takes the cell prisoner to the exercise yard. The prisoner is clothed in fatigue dress. He gets the command "Take up the shot". He stoops down, and owing to the shallow depression in the top of the wooden block he is able to get the fingers of both hands underneath. He lifts the shot. He then places his right hand directly under the shot, then puts his left hand under his right. He is then commanded to place the shot in the next block—either to the right or left of him—ten feet away. He puts down the shot and stands to attention. The command "Take up the shot" is given again. To the next block "Forward March". With his hands in the same position as before i.e., one hand under the other. he goes to the next block, puts down the shot, and stands to attention. The command "Take up the shot" is again given. To the next block march, and so on for one hour unless it rains. If it rains he is kept in his cell, handed a piece of tarred rope about six inches long and two inches thick.

This is known as oakum when picked. The prisoner is handed this hard piece of tarred rope and he is allowed to shred, or pick it. He beats the rope on the edge of his bed cot until he loosens the fibres. He is then able to reduce it to shreds. The finger nails are the sufferers in oakum picking.

The next part of the punishment is "Heavy Marching Order" minus his rifle and bayonet. This is done in the open on the barrack squire, and usually the Provost corporal is detailed for the job of drilling, or marching, the prisoner up and down, right and left turn. Every six paces turning to the right or left. The prisoner isn't given any time to get into a proper stride before he has to turn again. Next to shot drill this is the worst punishment. When in his cell he is visited every hour. After "Retreat" the sergeant of the guard takes over the prisoners, stating, on his guard report, that he visited the prisoners in guard room and cells every hour from retreat to reveille.

That was the sort of punishment awarded Wallace for his indifference to his company officer. It had-n't much effect on him.

Wallace was a likable chap for all his peculiar ways, and I may add here that he became one of the smartest men in the company, but he couldn't keep out of trouble. His tongue was continually giving him away.

JOHN HOSTRAWSER HEADS TORONTO GORE SOCIETY

An active organization since 1886 the Toronto Gore Agricultural Society met in annual session at the Claireville Hotel on Monday, January 20th.

Finances of the society are in sound shape, the report of Secretary-Treasurer L. H. Livingston revealed, with a cash bank balance of $228.30. Receipts amounted to $921.42, and expenditures to $693.12.

The society will again sponsor a fair and will continue its policy of past years in not holding field crop competitions in connection with the annual exhibition. Since several neighboring communities held field crop competitions and the entry was invariably small, the officers of the society felt that the project would not be justified.

The fair will be affiliated with the Ontario Fairs' Association, as has been the case in previous years.

John Hostrawser of Nashville was named president of the association for the coming year, succeeding J. H. Kellam, who held the position for the past two years. Mr. Kellam was appointed honorary president. Ira Champline and Ray Livingstone were voted first and second vice-presidents respectively, while L. H. Livingstone will again fill the position of secretary-treasurer.

Directors elected were: Etobicoke Township, Norman Livingstone, Geo. Conlon and John Fewster; Vaughan Township, Roy Livingstone, Howard Fletcher, John Hostrawser; Toronto Gore Township, Ira Champline, John Hooper, Herb Shaw, Charlie London, Eldridge Kellam, Anthony Pendergrass.

Associate directors were: Milton Heugil, William Host, Ross Livingston, George Hunter, Frank Julian, John Wilson, John Erwin, William Wilson, Arthur Weatherill, John Kellam, Fred Garbutt.

Auditors are Milton Heuch and Ronald Laurence.