

For the relief of painful feet ...

Bill Watts describes the delights of wartime parachute training, and explains how not to fire a mortar, what a 'bash' was, and how to avoid jankers. It's also a heart-warming tale of how comradeship and sheer determination helped him and his comrades to beat the odds stacked against them and win through to their objective

My reasons for volunteering for the Parachute Regiment were quite naive. After just six weeks in the army, marching around the Mountains of Mourne in ill-fitting army boots, my feet were covered in painful blisters and I began to wonder how I would cope when the training got really tough.

The solution came with the arrival of a captain from The Parachute Regiment looking for new recruits. As he described how we would be transported to the battlefield by air and then dropped by parachute I was hooked, deciding that not only would this be very exciting but, with no more long route marches, would also mean the end of blistered feet. What the captain conveniently failed to mention was that the Paras marched further and faster than most regiments – matched only by the SAS and Commandos. Furthermore, our training schedule also included a 30-mile route march and, before being accepted for parachute training, we would have to complete the 'bash', which was a 10-mile march and run in full battle order with rifle, which had to be completed in less than two hours.

We officially became members of The Parachute Regiment on 28 December 1944 when we arrived at Albany Barracks, Newport, Isle of Wight, but were disappointed when the sergeant told us that we would not receive the coveted red beret until we had finished our training, adding that most of us would never finish the course. Then to add to our gloom it started snowing hard.

Our training started early one morning when we were rudely woken by the platoon sergeant with orders to assemble outside in shorts, singlets and plimsolls. There were several inches of snow on the ground and it was still snowing when we started our two-mile run, which took us past the main gates of Parkhurst Prison. This was a high security prison where a group of prisoners, warmly dressed in heavy greatcoats, woollen balaclavas and thick gloves, were clearing the snow from the front drive. Seeing us in shorts and vests we were greeted with loud cheers and invitations to join them for an easier life in prison.

During a route march round the Isle of Wight we stopped at various places for weapons training, which

included firing two-inch mortars from the cliffs at Niton. The idea was that the live bombs would be fired out to sea where they couldn't do any damage – and this would also avoid the potential hazard of unexploded bombs landing and remaining undiscovered on the cliff-top. The target was a large buoy, anchored a few hundred yards from the cliffs, and we had to hold the mortar barrel at an angle of about 45 degrees and then carefully drop the mortar bomb into the tube.

Everything was going OK until, distracted by a shout from an NCO, one of our platoon pulled the mortar barrel towards him as he dropped the bomb into the tube. This meant that instead of soaring upwards at an angle of 45 degrees towards the target out at sea, the bomb went straight up!

I have never seen so many men move so fast as my fellow soldiers did when they realised that what goes straight up comes straight down. Fortunately, the mortar was being fired from the edge of the cliff and on its way down the mortar-bomb narrowly missed the edge of the cliff to explode on the rocks below.

Teaching us to throw live hand-grenades was also a dangerous occupation for the instructors, as it was not uncommon for a nervous recruit to drop the grenade

behind him as he brought back his arm to throw it. Fortunately, although we didn't know it at the time, for practice purposes the grenades were fitted with a long fuse which gave the instructor plenty of time to retrieve the grenade and throw it out of the concrete trench.

During our time on the Isle of Wight we were interviewed, on more than one occasion, by a psychiatrist whose job was to identify those recruits who would jib when the time came to make their first parachute jump. After several of our pals were blackballed by the psychiatrist and returned to their original units we dreaded our next interview in case we were also RTU'd.

Hardwick was our toughest challenge so far, and the last hurdle on the road to Ringway. All movement around the camp was 'at the double' and each day started at 6am with a two-mile run. After breakfast there was PT,



The author serving in Palestine after the Second World War

unarmed combat, boxing, milling, abseiling in the quarry, and tackling the punishing assault course. The final test was the 'bash', a 10-mile forced march (running and fast walking) in full battle-order including rifles. This had to be completed in two hours over a tough course and I began to worry whether I would ever get to Ringway.

Then, at the start of my last week at Hardwick I was sentenced to seven days jankers after the RSM stopped me on my way back from breakfast one morning because my hair was too long. Then he instructed two men to escort me to the barbers and wait there until my hair had been cut. As a result of this delay I missed a blanket changing parade and next morning I was on Company Orders. When I tried to explain the reasons for missing the parade the Commanding Officer said: 'That's no excuse! Your hair should always be short and tidy,' and sentenced me to seven days' jankers.

So, every morning after our two-mile run, and before breakfast, I had to parade outside the Guard Room with other 'defaulters'. Here we were inspected and then allocated our evening fatigues – which included washing-up in the kitchen, peeling potatoes or cleaning the latrines etc. Then at 2100 hours we had to parade, in our best uniform, for inspection outside the Guard Room. If the provost corporal, Corporal Council, found any faults in our turnout we could find ourselves on Company Orders again. We also had to produce another item of equipment such as our best boots, highly polished, so that the corporal could see his reflection in the toecaps, and with all the metal studs highly polished. Alternatively, we might have to produce our kitbag, freshly blancoed with white blanco and with all the brass eyelets highly polished.

Our squad started the 'bash' in the worst possible conditions, a very hot and humid day in May, and most of us were suffering from heat exhaustion before we reached the half-way mark. To make matters worse our rifle slings were cutting our shoulders, full water bottles bounced on our hips and ribs suffered constant chafing from full ammunition pouches. This is where the 10-man squad under an instructor was to prove a great success. for the 'esprit de corps' led to friendly rivalry among the squads, which also encouraged the stronger and fitter to help the weaker by carrying their equipment or by urging them to endure the pain barrier. Our instructor was brilliant, persuading those who were lagging behind to rejoin the squad. After eight miles we were all on 'automatic', just concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. We were also feeling very 'bolshie' for, from the very first day we

joined the Regiment, everything seemed to be stacked against us reaching Ringway.

We had seen our friends being RTU'd for a variety of reasons, the least understood being an unsatisfactory psychiatrist's report, and having already endured so much discomfort at Hardwick we fiercely resented this last attempt to prevent us reaching Ringway.

The thought which kept most of us going was, 'having come this far nothing is going to stop me reaching Ringway!', and although three men were in a bad state we did succeed in getting the whole squad to the finish in the time allowed, although several of us were carrying two rifles.

On the day before we left Hardwick we had to pack our kitbags by 1900 hrs so that they could be loaded on the lorry which was taking them to Chesterfield station. However, as I had to wear my denims for the evening fatigues, and my best uniform for the inspection at 2100hrs, I could not include these items in my kitbag which was collected at 1900hrs. I also had to keep my second uniform to wear on the next day. So, during the march to Chesterfield station on the following day, every member of my platoon volunteered to carry an item of my equipment, which I was able to pack in my kitbag when we reached the station.

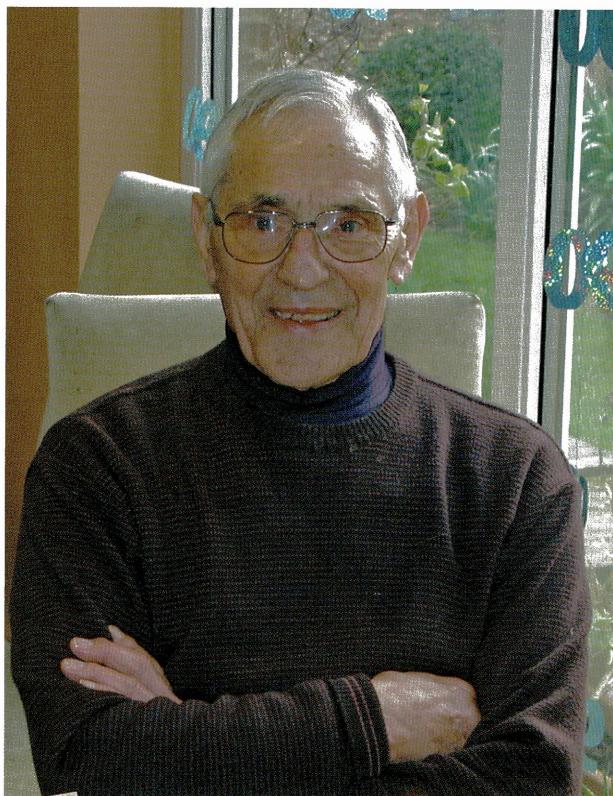
It was such a relief to reach Ringway, which was like a holiday camp compared with the strict regime at Hardwick, and, once again, trainees were divided into sticks of ten men who worked as a team throughout their time at Ringway. The food was more appetising, discipline was more relaxed and there were even sheets on the beds!

'Kilkenny's Circus' was similar to a day at a fairground and included trapezes, on which the trainees swung whilst learning correct flight drills, and wooden chutes down

which they slid before falling and rolling to practice their landing techniques. The 'Fan' enabled the trainees to jump from a platform thirty feet high, landing with the same impact as he would when using a parachute. Some found the 'Fan' a little intimidating, raising doubts in their minds as to their reaction when faced with their first parachute descent – jumping into space from a balloon tethered 800 feet above the ground. This was where the skill and patience of RAF instructors became so important, with their off-putting line of patter and humorous anecdotes.

Our RAF instructors made no attempt to avoid mention of the risks of parachuting and there were plenty of stories of accidents, 'Roman Candles' and near misses in the belief that if anyone was put-off by

Bill Watts pictured on his 90th birthday



the patter they wouldn't jump anyway.

The parachuting-course consisted of two balloon jumps followed by six aircraft jumps. Fortunately, our aircraft jumps were from a Dakota, for the round hole in the floor of the Whitley was three feet deep, and not very wide, and as your feet were caught in the slip-stream, they literally dragged you out of the aircraft with extreme force and speed. As your legs were in a vertical position when your feet hit the

slip-stream, your body position changed from vertical to horizontal which meant that your head was forced violently backwards and in many cases hit the side of the hole, which was known as 'ringing the bell', with very painful consequences

Despite regular interviews with a psychiatrist, to identify those who might jib when it was their turn to jump, there was still the odd refusal at Ringway and so a psychiatrist decided to find out what happened when someone refused to jump. Positioning himself in the centre of a stick of ten, with the intention of refusing when he reached the door, he soon discovered that when the green light went on the stick moved as one along the fuselage and nothing stopped this forward movement until the last man exited the aircraft. It was a case of jump or be pushed out of the door!

Numerous stories about the dreaded 'candle' circulated at Ringway and during the first descents from a Dakota there was always a 'joker' who would pass a small piece



'Kilkenny's Circus', a painting by Albert Richards. Original in Imperial War Museum

of candle around the aircraft. An unwanted gift which was quickly dropped like a hot brick!

Due to high winds our fourth Dakota jump was cancelled whilst we over the drop-zone and as the aircraft returned to Ringway I noticed that my friend, who was sitting next to me, was getting very agitated. Later he explained that although this was his fourth flight in a Dakota he had never landed in one and was more scared of this than jumping out with a parachute.

Parachute packing was an awesome responsibility for the WAAF packers and, after completing his first parachute jump, a padre confessed that 'for 32 years his whole trust had been in God, but for that few seconds, as he waited for his parachute to open, his confidence was transferred to the young WAAF who had packed his parachute'.

After receiving our 'Wings' and parachute pay of an extra 2 shillings a day – increasing the weekly pay-packet from 21 shillings (£1.05) to 35 shillings (£1.75) – we were obliged to serve with a parachute unit on operations, and to carry out parachute descents when ordered to do so. Future failure or refusal to carry out a parachute descent would result in a trial by Court Martial.

• *Bill Watts would like to contact anyone who served in 3 PARA in Palestine after the Second World War. Please get in touch by mail via Pegasus, RHQ PARA, Merville Barracks, Colchester CO3 7UT, or visit Bill's website: www.3para1945-48palestine.com*

First Jump From the Dreaded Balloon

Rhyme written by Bill Watts – to be sung to the tune of 'Mountains of Mourne'!

We all think this Ringway's a wonderful sight,
With paratroops jumping by day and by night
No more ten mile runs with rifle and pack,
We all survived Hardwick and we're not going back!
And Kilkenny's Circus is something to see,
We sail through the air on the flying trapeze
Introduced to the Whitley, a hole in the floor,
We prefer the Dakota where we jump through a door!

The balloon went up slowly to 800 feet,
When it stopped with a jerk I was white as a sheet
Then it swayed side to side as I waited my call,

And I clung to the cage so afraid I might fall
When the Sgt said 'OK! It's your turn to go!',
I jumped into space far too proud to say 'No!'
As the ground rushed towards me I looked to the sky,
'God! My 'chute hasn't opened, I'm going to die!'

Still falling I scream, but no sound from my lips,
Then the parachute opened, a crack like a whip.
A tug on my shoulders, I'm floating in space.
I feel I'm in heaven, there's a smile on my face
But the Sergeant below is shouting at me,
'Pull down hard on your lift-webs, you're close to a tree!'
Feet and knees close together I'm coming down fast,
But forget to lean forward and fall back on my arse!