

Harris/1

R.H. Harris 1974

From the Beginning :-----

It would appear that there is in all people, especially the young male, a strong instinct to indulge in military exercises. I well remember during the Boer War when I was seven or eight years old, having been born in 1893, it was popular entertainment to watch the warlike volunteers drilling with wooden rifles and doing wonderful manoeuvres in unison. Later, when among the bigger boys at school we would drill with the dummy rifles which would fire caps and make quite a satisfactory noise. At longer intervals the bigger boys would go in the afternoon to the rifle range and fire at real targets with real ammunition.

All through the period up to about 1909 there was a more or less loose organization of volunteers who elected their own officers and were provided with uniforms and arms and which were mainly happy social organizations.

All this was altered by the "Defence Act 1909" which introduced universal military training.

- 12 to 14 years, Junior Cadets
- 14 to 18 years, Senior Cadets
- 18 to 25 years, Territorial Force
- 25 to 30 years, Reserve.

Of course to get this scheme off the ground was a colossal task and was tackled in the only possible way. The best of the officers and N.C.O.s already in the country were given tasks to suit each one's ability but the action that ensured success was the obtaining of officers and N.C.O.s from the British Army. Officers were brought in to look after the senior staff jobs and most important of all, time expired N.C.O.s were offered, after twelve or eighteen years service, and with no other trade, the opportunity to practice the one trade they knew.

To the British Army N.C.O., such men as Wallingford, Fletcher, Hopkins, Cheater, Partridge, the Country owes the fact that it was able to send an expeditionary force with a reasonable level of efficiency. Of these I mention Wallingford, Fletcher, and Cheater rose to the rank of major. I have no doubt that there were in other parts of the country those who have valued other N.C.O.s and will join with me in giving them credit for a job well done.

Of course the next thing to do was to appoint and to train to the point of being at least one jump ahead of the raw recruits, a band of officers to be ready to descend on the raw mass of humanity when it arrived.

All this took time and it was not until 1911 that everyone was required to register and Sergt. Major Partridge came round getting a list of some likely-looking types who would be willing to go to camp ten days before the main lot for the purpose of being trained for non-commissioned officers. Someone told me about this after he had passed so I made a point of seeing him as he came back and had my name put on the (bottom of the) list.

We duly received notice and our travelling warrants to go to camp at Kensington Park, Whangarei.

So it was that prospective N.C.O.s from all over the North Auckland peninsula assembled at the appointed place and were descended on by Partridge and his band of helpers. It is a wonder we didn't break his heart.

Nine out of ten of us were about as green as we could possibly be and had never done any military training before but by the end of our period of special training we had at least got ourselves a few jumps ahead of our prospective victims, the rest of the battalion.

Before the arrival of this influx there was a list of promotions on the notice ~~board~~ board. The last name on the list, to be Lance Cpl. supernumerary, was R. H. Harris. The only consolation was the amusement it caused. It was generally considered that it was the next rank above acting blank file.

So from 1911 our regular training started, with night parades about once a week and half day parades, usually on Saturday afternoons, six or eight times a year, plus annual camp.

Infantry Training, Musketry Regulations, Field service Regulations, I studied them all in an endeavour to get something beyond my one lonely stripe. One Saturday in October 1913 we were having a half day parade and the Adjutant, Capt. Peacock was present. I had been putting the troops through some movements when he started giving me instructions, and asking me to do this movement or that, all of which I did faultlessly as he only seemed to ask me to movements with which I was familiar, after which he called me over.

I marched briskly up and saluted. He held out his hand.

"Congratulations Harris. You have just passed the examination for sergeant". So that is how it came about that I was never a corporal.

Since I worked for my Father and he was only too pleased to see me taking a lively interest in Military Training, I did not miss any chance that presented itself of getting extra instruction. There was a refresher course at Palmerston North that was attended by officers and n.c.os from most parts of the country. As it turned out I was the sole representative of my regiment.

At the beginning of 1914 I heard that examinations for first appointment to commissions would be held in July and got the necessary recommendations to enable me to sit.

A class of instruction was held at the Drill Hall in Rutland Street, Auckland, for those in the Auckland Military District who desired a little brush up before the examination. Again I was the sole representative of The North Auckland Regt. This course was held in June and the examinations were held on July 7th.

What happened in August is well known.

In a few days lists were opened for those who wished to serve and hasty preparations were made for departure to camp whenever word came.

It was only to be expected that anyone in my position would be among the first to go. My 21st birthday had been in June, I had no dependants, my military training was above the average and there was a general feeling that Great Britain and New Zealand ~~or~~ were one.

So it happened that before the war was a week old we assembled in the Kohukohu hall to be farewelled by our friends.

Our mode of progression would in itself cause some amusement today. We were taken by launch to Rangiahua, about twenty five of us, got what sleep we could about the Rangiahua Hotel, were taken to Kerikeri next day in horse-drawn vehicles of one description and another, and then waited for the tide as the launch was high and dry by the Stone Store. Kerikeri at

time would make a citizen of today rub his eyes. Coming down from the Cross Roads the first sight of a building was The Homestead and I don't think that there was another until the Stone Store.

The launch took us over to Russell where the S.S. Clansman was waiting for us and sailed as soon as we were aboard.

Next morning we woke up in Auckland and after breakfast marched out to Epsom Camp which was on Alexandra Park Racecourse.

Several parties arrived at the same time at the gate and while we waited our turn to be admitted, Sergeant Mc Geehan who had sat the Officers examination with me in July came over with the mornings "Herald" in which was a list of those who had passed.

"New Zealand Herald" Aug. 14th, 1914.

OFFICERS' EXAMINATIONS.

The Officer Commanding the Auckland Military District has been notified by headquarters that the following candidates of the Auckland District have qualified at the examination, held on July 7, for first appointment to commissions, Territorial Force, in the order named below :-

There follows a list of forty one names the first of which is R. Harris.

So it was that we were mobilised and started a period of intensive training.

You may imagine that discipline was easy to maintain and sick parades were small. If a man misbehaved himself or too frequently went to see the doctor there were always a number ready to take his place.

In spite of the limited space in which we had to work, we were able to get in much useful instruction and when it came time for marches and tactical exercises we were able to take to the streets.

You will have heard of our false start when we went to sea one night and were mostly seasick but soon recovered in the morning when we found ourselves back in harbour. From this time we lived on board.

Our platoon, No. 11, which was commanded by Lieut. N. W. McD. Weir, who was at that time fresh from Duntroon, but who lived to be knighted as Chief of the General Staff, provided the crew for one of the life boats and so did some rowing about the harbour and became the duty boat any time such was wanted.

One day we had rowed ashore and were having a picnic. One of the men came to me when the officer was temporarily absent and asked if he might go for a few minutes with his brother to see their mother who lived just up the road. On their promise to be back in ten minutes at most I let them go. This was, I suppose, part of my education. We found them finally up at the Three Lamps Hotel, and were to regret many times thereafter that we had not left them there.

So we finally got away from Wellington on October 16th and set sail for Hobart. Of course our destination was secret but if our destination was Antofagasta why should a semaphore message be sent from our ship to say that we had no Hobart chart? Q. E. D.

Events proved that we had guessed correctly and we went for a route march through this beautiful city of flowers. Only a few days before they had bidden farewell to their own boys but they nevertheless turned out and lined the streets, walked beside us and decorated us with flowers.

Before daylight next morning we were on our way ~~before daylight~~ and were soon heading across the Great Australian Bight, to make our next stop at Albany.

We had thought that our convoy was quite impressive but in the harbour here was the whole Australian Expeditionary Force. While we filled in the day as best we could I imagine that the Naval officers were busy arranging everything and instructing the merchant seamen in the intricacies of keeping station.

We of The Auckland Battalion were rather crowded but every one was now broken into sea travel and as a matter of fact scarcely anyone had been sea sick since leaving Wellington, our breaking in had been so gentle.

I don't intend to tell you about the Emden. You may have heard about it before, but there is another story that you will not have heard and which I will proceed to tell.

As we began to travel up the Indian Ocean the climate got steadily warmer and the refrigerated holds that had been turned into sleeping quarters had not the best of ventilation. My mate Mandy and I therefore spent quite a lot of time walking up and down the deck.

In my platoon were two brothers who were obviously half Chinese. They were both good soldiers who did anything they were asked, kept themselves clean and tidy, and neither had ever been in any trouble. The older one was easy going, and good natured and I am sure was not at all worried by his appearance. The other was really a smart soldier who wore his uniform carefully and had been picked as the best turned out man on the guard. I should imagine that when he parted his glossy black hair he would look at his reflection in the glass and say to himself: "No one would think I was half Chinese". Of course his mates didn't care any way. Also he could put up a creditable performance as a light weight boxer.

This day I suggested to Mandy that we go up on deck, and he was leading the way across the well at the foot of the stairs where some of the boys were playing quoits. The younger of my Chinese had just had a throw and had landed about three on the peg out of six. Mandy, rather rudely I thought, scooped up the quoits, went back to the mark, and proceeded to put all six on the peg. He was in hilarious mood and as he turned away he said over his right shoulder; "There You are. You should get some lessons from your Chinese friends."

Albert's right hook arrived before he thought about withdrawing his chin and to say that he lost consciousness would be an under statement. We laid him out nicely and waited for return of Mandy. After about five minutes I went up and got Dr Craig. He wanted to know what caused it. We told him that he had had a knock on the chin. He could see that we didn't want to go into any further details and characteristically didn't press the question. Telling us to let him know if there was no return of consciousness in ten minutes, he left.

The cause of all this fuss was about twenty feet away with a knot of his fr

friends in a terrible stew trying to justify his action in striking an N.C.O. and a sergeant at that. I went over to him and said:

"For goodness sake keep quiet. That is all you have to do. You belong to my platoon, I saw and heard all that happened. I'll see that you don't get into any trouble."

Shortly afterwards Mandy opened his eyes and in about five minutes was able to walk up to the deck where he could get some fresh air. We sat down and I explained what had happened and that he would need to go and apologise to Albert which he willingly did.

Both the participants in this incident made history later in two different incidents. Mandy first.

About the end of January, 1915, Auckland Battalion was camped by Ismailia railway station when 15th Company had orders to proceed to Toussoum, which was on the canal between Lake Timsah and the Great Bitter Lake. We were to go by train in the direction of Suez for a few miles and then march across country through desert scrub to our destination.

After seeing my platoon settled in their third class carriage I went along the platform until I came to a second class door with "15coy Sgts" in chalk on ~~it~~ it. It was the type of compartment one does not see in New Zealand. The seats ran the full width of the carriage and the only door opened directly on to the platform. On turning the handle and giving a pull the door opened a bit but seemed as if someone was holding it. One almighty pull opened the door alright but produced a result that was rather a surprise to all. The window was of the type that was adjusted by means of a wide strap with eyelets to fit over a peg on the window ~~on~~ sill. Some bright boy had fastened his belt to the end of this strap to lengthen it and had taken a turn on the hat rack. In response to my last pull the whole of the inside panelling had come away and the window was swinging on the rack.

A kind of deputy assistant junior porter happened to be passing and immediately became a bundle of excitement. He pointed and gesticulated and jabbered away in spitting Arabic which, although I scarcely know a word of it, I believe to be well adapted for invective. When he was out of breath he ran off to see the Caliph.

The messenger soon came back with the caliph, or guard, or stationmaster or whatever he was to find Mandy leaning with his whole body out the window and carrying on an animated conversation with some imaginary person at the far end of the train. The porter pointed, and gesticulated quite a bit more while Mandy continued to talk to the other end of the train.

At last the caliph seemed to claim Mandy's attention but all he could get out of him was blank, open eyed lack of understanding. After a while the caliph turned on the porter and told him a few home truths about his ancestry and pointed to the other end of the platform to which he retired crestfallen to be followed by the caliph. Mandy collapsed on to the seat in a shower of bits. He had been holding The Egyptian State Railways together with his ~~k~~ knees.

Sergeant Major J. W. Fletcher served with ~~us~~ us and was a great favourite. He had been in the Gordon Highlanders and had served with them in South Africa. He seemed to think that the Gordons were quite important and told us of the prowess of certain ones who had won Victoria Crosses among them Piper Findlater who, although wounded in both legs sat on a rock at Dagai

and cheered his comrades on by playing his pipes. Of course this story was retailed among the troops with variations and was soon well known to all.

On the day of the landing at Gallipoli we came under shrapnel fire at our first assembly positions and Albert, the part Chinese, received a bullet in the calf of the leg and told his section commander, Ben ~~Cox~~ Cox, That he could'nt go any further.

"Nonsense", said Ben, "If Findlater could play the pipes when he had both legs shot off there was no reason to fall out for a mere bullet in the leg."

Christmas Eve, 1914 Sgt. Major Partridge, Sgt. Major Fletcher, Ken Begg, (Sgt.) and I went down to Cairo. We naturally herded together because none of ~~us~~ ^{us} ~~were~~ ^{was} inclined to excesses as far as entertainment was concerned. When it came round to about nine o'clock and we thought about getting back to camp at Zeitoun we found that there would be a considerable wait before the next train so decided to take a tram to Heliopolis and to walk over from there.

On the tram were some sergeants of the Manchester Territorials who persuaded us to go over to their mess for a while. They had a stage at one end of the marquee and were in the middle of a concert. There were no doubt a number of professional entertainers in their ~~nd~~ ranks because some of the items were outstanding and all were good.

When midnight came they started on Xmas Carols. Some one sat at the piano and played one after the other, without music, and all seemed to join in with a voice raised occasionally as someone asked for his favourite.

It was most moving.

Perhaps it would be one o'clock when we arrived at our own quarters to find that there was an altercation in progress at the bottom of my platoon lines and on going nearer recognised the Colonel's voice and saw the flash of bayonets which seemed to suggest a file of the guard. Not wishing to be seen at that hour fully dressed as if I had only just come home, ~~I~~ I rushed to my tent and threw off belt, jacket, and cap and accompanied by Fletcher, rushed back again to find all quiet. The next moment Rothery rushed out of the tent. We "forcibly restrained" him and succeeded in getting the story.

This tent, that contained about the most law abiding section in the platoon, had invested some of their hard-earned savings in some liquid refreshment from the canteen and had been having a party. Across a narrow street was the colonel's tent and he had evidently wanted to go to sleep. Lights Out was at 9.15 but he had been a bit lenient on account of the season but, thinking no doubt that they had already had latitude enough, had made a final appeal but had met with nothing but abuse.

Rothery's one ambition was to join his mates in the Guard Tent. We took his boots off and made him go to bed.

Next morning the Colonel declared an amnesty on account of the day and some very sorry soldiers returned to normal.

On the last day of the year I had been "warned" for guard. There were twelve men, Cpl. Andy Frew, who had served his time in The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, was corporal, I was sergeant, and we had a cook, Steve Patt, who had attended school with me in my childhood.

When I paraded the guard at battalion headquarters it was to find that our own C.S.M. was deputising for the R.S.M. He inspected us and then took me into the orderly room to show me on the map where we had to go.

There was an order from Brigade giving the map reference of some newly

established detention barracks where we were to be the outside guard. On running this off on the map I maintained that there was nothing in the nature of military installations anywhere in the locality. We checked and rechecked and then Partridge decided to ring Brigade and found that they had made a mistake and the new reference meant that we had to march about three miles in the opposite direction in half an hour. Of course this was impossible but we stepped out and did our best.

we had not caused any inconvenience through being a few minutes late as we were the first guard to be mounted here, and further, since there were not yet any prisoners, we had to find only one post--- on the main Gate.

On asking about rations --we so that our cook could get to work, I was told that we were supposed to hav brought our own.

No use arguing, especially with an Australian, so I sent off Cpl Frew and Steve Fatt to go back to camp and get some rations.

They arrived back about eight o'clock staggering under something, and told their sad story --Steve mostly.

When they got back to camp it was New Year's Eve and everyone was out listening to the bands marching up and down, everyone shouting and singing. They couldn't get sense out of anyone so Steve thought of "You poor chaps starving over there" so suggested that they help themselves.

This they did, Steve, on account of his knowledge of the different cuts, especially tender steak, going into the butcher shop and making his choice.

They had bread, butter, sugar, tea, potatoes, and onions. Steve was a good cook. What more could hungry young men wish for?

Capt. Wallingford who was our Musketry Officer, always put forward the theory that the best troops were the ones who could bring the greatest volume of well aimed fire on to a target at an unknown range in the least possible time.

One day when we were out training in an area of desert that was a confused mass of sand dunes, I was suddenly ordered to take the platoon "Up that way" and on rounding a corner someone announced "You are being fired on from over there. Take appropriate action."

There were cardboard standing figures on a far ridge and a convenient bank a few yards away. I gave my orders:

"Line that bank. Load. (All the best shots were trained to fire together for range finders--on finding)

"Range Finders only. At 600, At the figures in front, On Aim, Fire."

The bullets struck beautifully together about half the height of the figures too low. The range must therefore be 700yards. My next order was:

No. 11 Platoon, 700, at the figures in front, Five rounds, and before I got out the word fire someone shouted "Cease fire". This was the correct range and someone called out "So many seconds". I forget how many.

On that incident was based the assertion that the 15th Company was the best shooting company. We had found the range in about half the time that it had taken the next best.