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Location: Glanamman, Carmarthenshire

Interviewer: Neil Davies

Camera: Hugh Morgan

Cyril Stuart

Parachute Regiment

1950 to 1952

Glanamman, Carmarthenshire



“The best thing that ever happened to me. It taught me a lot about myself.”

Methodology

Cyril's story of service in the Parachute regiment was gleaned from a visit to his home and the conversation which took place. Cyril was 93 years of age at the time of the visit.

The conversation with Cyril was recorded on film.

The majority of the content in this narrative relies heavily upon Cyril's memories. However, the author has cross-checked Cyril's recollections with additional sources of information and consulted with other resources, in order to create an enhanced picture of Cyril's journey in the British Army.

To provide clarity, the author has summarized and edited some of the conversation from the interview, where Cyril is quoted in this narrative.

Background

Cyril was born in Dagenham, East London in December 1931. He grew up in a close, hard-working family of six, who lived in a modest council house. His father was an automotive worker at the Ford motor plant at Dagenham. Wealth was spread thin in the 1930s and in common with most families' times were hard. However, as a child this aspect of life passed over him.

"They were hard times. We didn't feel it was hard times because we didn't know any different as children. We were born into that and that's the way life is. We were happy kids."

At seven years of age, Cyril recalls the start of the Second World War. Life carried on and he has many memories of the war years. These include recollections of the RAF and Luftwaffe battling it out in the skies over London.

Cyril left school at the age of fourteen. A change that is difficult to image in today's society. He sat down with his father to decide what kind of job he wanted.

"At fourteen Dad said to me 'What you going to do as a job son?' I said, I don't know Dad. He said, 'You're always messing around in the kitchen, why don't you go as a Chef?' I said yeah alright and fortunately he knew someone who worked in the Dorchester."

So not long after that conversation, Cyril began an apprenticeship at the famous Dorchester hotel.

"That's where I was from fourteen to eighteen."

Although he was busy working at the Dorchester, Cyril was interested in the Army.

"I did join the Army cadets at fourteen as well and I boxed for them."

Reflecting upon his teenage years, Cyril is candid about his teenage self.

“I was a little terror. I had two elder brothers who taught me how to look after myself and I could. If you wanted a scrap, I’m your man.”

The positive aspects of the Army began to shape Cyril’s character.

“Joining the Army cadets taught me a lesson. I enjoyed every minute of it and the boxing part taught me a bit of discipline. As good as you think you are, there’s always somebody that can give you a good hiding!”

From 1947, young men reaching the age of eighteen were liable for conscription into the military, in order to complete a period of National Service. In April 1950 National Servicemen were required to serve a minimum of eighteen months. This was raised to two years the following October, with the Korean war drawing heavily upon the already stretched manpower of the British Army. There was a requirement for eligible men to submit for medical tests. Cyril passed the medical test.

“I was eighteen years old and suddenly a letter dropped on the doorstep. Report to the local medical centre to do your National Service.”

Cyril had little choice of what service he was conscripted into, and it wasn’t long before orders came.

“Report to Colchester to do your ten weeks infantry training. I was off to Colchester to do my ten weeks infantry training with the Essex regiment.”

National Service

Cyril’s Army record is clearly marked in his Army record book. He formally joined the Army on 21st April 1950 at Colchester. He was 5’10 inches in height, weighed ten stone and had a 33-inch chest. Clearly, he was fit and healthy at the time. It is also worth noting that he travelled to Colchester alone, so was denied the benefit of having some mutual support from a friend.

The British Army has a long history with the garrison town of Colchester in Essex and in 1950, it was home to a training establishment which trained National Servicemen. The barracks abundance of military facilities proved extremely useful. Conscripted men like Cyril, would soon find themselves ‘square bashing’ on the parade square, attacking the assault course and getting to know the perimeter of the barracks on numerous runs. The Training staff soon brought them up to the required standard of fitness.

National Servicemen underwent a period of training in the basics. Cyril remembers it was ten weeks in length and recalls some of the ‘highlights.

“I always thought I was fit but I realised I wasn’t. The runs and weapons training I took to quite well. It was a shock, people screaming in your face how useless you are. But I realised that what they do is knock you down then build you back up.

“We did our ten weeks training and afterwards out of the whole intake I was with, I was the only one who volunteered for the Paras. The remainder of the intake were being

issued with greens and were off to Burma. So, I reckoned that I'd much rather be jumping out of aircraft than scrubbing around in the jungle."

Cyril's Army training record shows he completed basic training on 3rd July 1950. Over the ten weeks of training, he'd made several friends. His decision to volunteer for the Paras attracted some comment.

"Well, they couldn't understand why I wanted to jump out of aeroplanes. But I said I'd always been the sort to enjoy a challenge."

The National Servicemen in Cyril's intake were all posted, which left Cyril in limbo. He was waiting to join the next course of would-be entrants into the Parachute regiment.

"I was the only one there and they struggled to know what to do with me. So, they stuck a regimental policeman's armband on me and suddenly I was a regimental policeman. I was marching the prisoners around, getting their haircuts and you won't believe this but, on their hands, and knees scrubbing their cells and blocks with Toothbrushes!"

A remarkable turn of events.

"I couldn't believe it. There I was eighteen years of age, marching the prisoners around. Always double time 'quick march!"

The Parachute Regiment

The regiment was formed on 1st August 1942 by a decree from none other than wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The theory at the time was that having an airborne force, enabled Commanders to rapidly insert a body of highly trained infantry soldiers onto the battlefield from the air. Paratroopers were trained to be resilient, self-reliant and aggressive. They were expected to 'take the fight to the enemy' and this is indeed what the regiment accomplished. The regiment gained respect and during World War Two formed a fearsome reputation in several campaigns throughout the advance across North Africa, Italy and northern Europe.

Pegasus company (P company)- Aldershot, Hampshire

Given the expectations placed on Paratroopers, it was expected that soldiers seeking to join the regiment would need to evidence the individual qualities required of an airborne soldier. This was achieved by challenging entrants to complete a weeklong course, where candidates face a series of ten demanding physical tests. Candidates were judged on the essential qualities mentioned earlier and indeed, the test remains in evidence to this day. Those that pass this tough week, can legitimately wear the famous maroon beret of the airborne forces.

" P company. Oh, that was wicked that was. Again, I think I knew what they were doing. They are trying to make you give up. If there's anything on that course where you say, 'Oh I can't go on', its go on RTU...back to unit."*

*For clarity, when using the term ‘wicked’, Cyril is referring to the traditional term representing harshness, rather than the modern interpretation of the word as something exceptional.

It’s worth dwelling on Cyril’s memories of this course. Passing P company is a significant achievement which all would be Paras, without exception, look back on with pride.

“I can remember getting there, P company. Straight away you had to Blanco your equipment, belts, gaiters and all that. We were shown how to lay out your equipment for inspection and all that went on up until about midnight. You get up in the morning and then it hits you. You double march everywhere. You do the Assault course, not once but you go around it over and over again. The worst thing I ever done was the log race. You all had toggles. There were four of us on a telegraph pole. It’s a race up three miles on loose shingle. The winners get a drive back to Aldershot and into the swimming pool. The rest had to run back. In the Gym it was physical exhaustion always. You knew whatever you were going to do you would end up physically exhausted.”*

*Whiten with a special product

Those that made it to the last day faced the judgment, had they made the grade ?

“We all got in the hall and the people they called out passed. Would you believe it, I was the first name offered! I couldn’t believe it. I was never fast but I could always plod on.”

The achievements were mounting up. He’d passed his basic training, successfully undertaken a short period as a regimental policeman and now he’d passed the toughest challenge to date, P company. It was time to learn how to become a Parachutist.



The maroon beret. Cyril was presented with his beret after passing ‘P company’.

Image courtesy-Ceto Militaria

Parachute training – RAF Abingdon

“From there we went to RAF Abingdon, jump school. It was a weeks pre jump training. All day we were in mock up fuselages. It was red...go! Up the roof of this hangar, they had this fan. You’d put this harness on, and it was about a thirty-foot drop. You had to jump, and the fan slowed your fall. Then we were doing para rolls, jumping off towers the whole week. To get your wings you had to do eight jumps. The first two from the old war time barrage balloon, with a cage underneath. Five of you got in and you went up a thousand feet....and you’d jump.”

Cyril remembers this first jump.

“It’s strange. You get in the cage, and the Balloon goes up. It’s on a cable. Nobody’s talking, you’re stood in silence. You get up to about two hundred feet, and the wind seems to be swaying the cage. You get up to your thousand feet. I was the fifth man to jump, not a happy bunny! The jump trainer looks at me and says, ‘Come on Stuart, you’ve done well up until now’. I was a bit, shall I, shan’t I, thinking who’s flipping idea was this! But I thought, I’ve got to go, so I stood in the door, and he says ‘Go’ on your shoulder and you go. You get down and you feel so elated. You’ve conquered fear.”

After successfully completing the second jump from the balloon, it was time for the aircraft proper.

“We did one water jump, one night jump and four others from Dakotas. It was scary and don’t forget then, we didn’t have emergency chutes. It was the same equipment as the war.”*

*C47 Douglas Dakota transport aeroplane.



A photograph of a Parachute drop from a ‘Dakota’ taken a few years before Cyril’s National Service.

Image courtesy – War history online

Having completed all eight jumps, a parade was held and those that passed were presented with the coveted Parachute wings. Cyril’s Army training record documents this event occurring on 6th September 1950.



The Parachute wings badge worn by soldiers that pass the Parachute training course

Image courtesy - Wikimedia coms

Following a passing out parade, Cyril was posted to the first battalion, which was undertaking a field exercise in Norfolk.

“I was posted to the first battalion along with about twelve others. At the time they were on manoeuvres in Norfolk. I remember we got there one evening and it was pouring with rain. During the night they had to get camouflaged so that an aircraft couldn’t see them. During the day the aircraft went over to see if they could spot them. That was the introduction to the battalion.”

1st Battalion - Parachute Regiment

The battalion was formed in 1948, after the merger of the 4th and 6th battalions. In the years that followed, 1 Para soldiers saw active service in Cyprus and Egypt. The battalion went on to perform several United Nations peacekeeping tours. By 1950 the Parachute regiment itself operated three full time battalions, one, two and three, as well as a number of reserve units based within the Territorial Army. The regiment was integrated into 16th Independent Parachute brigade.

Although Cyril had passed P Company and the Parachutist course, on joining 1 Para, there was more training to undertake. Soldiers joining the regiment, were required to improve their infantry skills up to the standard required of an airborne regiment.

“When you got to the Paras, you had to go through another period of infantry training. You had to be able to use every infantry weapon that was available. The Sten gun, Bren gun, two-inch mortar, that type of thing. We threw about half a dozen hand grenades on the range.”

Cyril recalls a particular incident when training with the Mortars.

“There was four of you one the range at one time. One who fires and number two puts the bomb in. We were all laid out, the four of us. Two teams. I was number two, so bomb in and fire then reload. I went to put in (the bomb) and it wouldn’t go in. I turned to the Sergeant and said, ‘it won’t go in’. He shouted, ‘Clear the range, you two stay there’. The first bomb hadn’t gone!

The two of us had to stay there until the Sergeant put his protective gear on. He came out and we had to pick it up and tip it (the bomb) into his hands. He marched off down the range, did what he had to do and blow it up. I thought ‘why me!’”



A WW2 era Paratrooper 2 inch Mortar set, complete with the bomb that nearly done for Cyril.

Image courtesy – IMA-USA.com

That was one of a series of close shaves Cyril survived, during his career in the Paras.



A photograph Cyril has kept from the early days. Paratroopers boarding a Fairchild C82 Troop carrier at an undisclosed airfield. The USAF operated these aircraft for airborne training.

The infantry training continued until a sudden order was given.

“That sort of training continued until suddenly we were given 72 hours leave and informed that we were going to Cyprus. I think the Shah of Persia was going to nationalise the oilfields and they were going to rush out the 16th Independent Parachute brigade. I suppose to make him believe that we were going to do a drop.”

Cyril’s assessment was fairly accurate. In fact, tensions over the Iranian Oil industry were building. In March of 1951, the Iranian parliament voted to nationalise the Anglo Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). In addition, there was an increasing resentment against Britain, developing throughout the middle east. The British government was facing pressure to respond this threat against British influence over oil production and an increasing desire of Arab countries for national independence. Ultimately this struggle would play out in the disastrous Suez War of 1956 and a slow withdrawal of British assets from the region.

“We went down to Portsmouth I believe and onto an aircraft carrier, HMS Warrior, which was due for scrap but was being used to get the brigade out there.”

Cyprus

What eventually transpired was that immediate tensions decreased, and 1 Para was deployed to Cyprus to undertake peacekeeping duties. Cyprus was experiencing another period of unrest, where different factions continued to stage violent confrontations. Turkish and Greek Cypriots remained at loggerheads and the situation on the island was tense. The unstable situation prompted the emergency deployment of British peacekeepers.

The voyage to Cyprus wasn’t altogether straight forward.

“I can remember the Bay of Biscay. Once I noticed the sway, you can’t get it out (of your mind). I wasn’t sick but anyway we got to Cyprus. I remember us doing compulsory sun training, to prevent anybody getting sunburn.”

Upon arrival on the island, 1 Para disembarked and were trucked to a transit camp.

“We were unloaded onto what I describe as cattle trucks. We were taken to a tented camp on the edge of an airbase in Nicosia. We could see the Comet aircraft coming in. We were based there the whole time we were in Cyprus.”

Once 1 Para had established itself, the local community soon saw the maroon berets worn by the Paratroopers, patrolling the streets and roads around Nicosia.

Also, it wasn’t long before 1 Para soldiers began to explore the attractions on offer to off duty servicemen in Nicosia. The battalions Commanding Officer decided to intervene.

“I’m afraid we got into a bit of bother in Nicosia. So, they kept us out of town, marching all over the place. “We marched all over that island.”

Indeed, the Paras soon became familiar with the islands landscape, which of course included the Troodos mountains.



Located roughly in the centre of the island, Troodos is the largest mountain range in Cyprus. At nearly 6,500 feet, Mt Olympus is its highest point.

Image -commons.wikimedia.org

“There’s a photograph of us doing an advance to contact on Troodos mountain. In the afternoon, when all the locals were having a siesta! There was a couple of chaps who were quite ill.”



Cyril has this photograph of 1 Para on exercise in the Troodos mountains.

1 Para's officers sought various ways to keep their soldiers active. Cyril recalls one such activity that was very demanding in the midday heat.

"We marched to Kyrenia often. They decided that everyone had to swim a mile. Half a mile off Kyrenia is 'Snake island'. They had somebody at Snake island and when you got there (swimming) they turned you around. I did it."

Cyril talks about the next deployment after Cyprus. He believes that after about six months on the island, the battalion was flown to Egypt. Infact the airborne forces website 'Paradata', which documents the regiments history, lists an emergency deployment of Paratroopers to the Suez Canal Zone in January 1952. This was in response to the Egyptian Army, which seemed to threaten an advance to gain control of the Suez canal.

Egypt and the Suez Canal Zone

In January 1952, approximately 70,000 British servicemen were positioned in the canal zone. 16 Independent Parachute Brigade's presence was a precautionary measure, which enabled military Commanders to launch an airborne operations if required.

1 Para deployed to Egypt and took up positions on the western bank of the canal. This overt build-up of British forces was aimed at deterring the Egyptian Army from considering any advance on the canal.

"Suddenly we were flown out there. Again, in a tented camp along the banks of the Suez canal. It was an exciting part of my service, for many reasons. When we first got there, we were dug in alongside of the road that was going to Cairo."

The Officer Commanding 16th Independent Parachute Brigade at the time was Sir Kenneth Darling. He was in the middle east, so given 1 Para was encamped in the canal zone, it presented him with an opportunity to inspect the readiness of his Paratroopers.

"We could hear Darling deciding he was going to inspect the troops. He did a drive up with his flags out on the car, up and back. When he came back, he told the CO that not one person saluted him. Silly as this sounds, as a result of that we were given a week's punishment drills. At 9 o' clock every morning we were given 'Cobweb drill'. Marching up and down at double time. There was a bit of a disturbance in the NAAFI that night."

A significant event occurred whilst Cyril was in Egypt. This confirms that he was indeed in Egypt in the winter of 1952.

"While we were out there the King died. Six o' clock in the morning we were stood in a square with the Padre in the middle. We were informed the King had died and it was 'The King is dead. God save the Queen'".

King George VI died 6th February 1952, and Princess Elizabeth ascended to the throne.

Earlier, Cyril mentioned that the time he spent in Egypt would prove to be his most exciting time in the Army. He now explains why.

“We were doing jumps. Now, I was a Bren Gunner. I was told that the ‘PIAT’ man had broken his back and I was now the PIAT man. I’d never fired a PIAT. It was what they used during the war. It was like a drainpipe with a spring you cocked. I think the idea was that at Arnhem they had to rendezvous by ‘Cannisters’ (The PIATS were in the Cannisters). We were the ‘Guinea pigs. Which was alright, somebody’s got to do it. Whatever your weapon was, you’ve got to jump with it. Unfortunately, mine was a PIAT.”

This was a jump that would become ingrained in Cyril’s memory.

“It was a long time ago but it’s not the sort of thing you would have forgotten. So, I was now going to do my first jump with this PIAT. This large kit bag, where you had the PIAT in the middle, six PIAT bombs around it and packing. I had to strap that on my legs, seventy-five pounds! One strap on your ankle and one strap below the knee. The people with the heaviest equipment were always up the front of the ‘stick’. I was third. This is crazy but it was just after the war. In front of me was the ‘Vickers machine gun’. The barrel, then base plate and the Tripod. Those three were in front of me and they went first. Out I went. As I was coming down, before my chute had opened, I’m looking down at the PIAT. When my chute opened, whoosh like that, the whole lot broke away.”

In normal circumstances losing a weapon had serious repercussions.

“It’s a court martial offence to drop equipment, because if it touches somebody’s canopy, well, you know.....There was no enquiry because it was deemed to be faulty equipment. Now I had to do it again!”



The ‘PIAT’ Projector Infantry Anti-Tank gun that nearly done for Cyril.

“I was determined I was going to hold on to this thing. So, there’s a handle and I put my wrist through the handle and grabbed hold of it. Exactly the same thing happened! I went out and whoosh. But the top strap had gone down to my ankle and I’m coming down like that, bent over with my hand trapped. I couldn’t get straight to release it. As you could imagine, I was panicking. I knew what would happen (when landing strapped into 75 pounds of PIAT). I just managed to release it.”

So, Cyril had encountered another life threatening event and lived to tell the tale.



These two period photographs Cyril has kept amply demonstrate the amount of equipment that the Paratroopers were jumping with at the time.

A tour of duty in the 'Suez canal zone' had become an unpopular posting for a lot of soldiers in the early 1950's. Armed attacks from Egyptian nationalists, illness and the dry hot climate contributed to the general feeling of hostility the country harboured towards British soldiers. Indeed, Britain would suffer the loss of fifty-four servicemen in the zone between 1950 and 56.

"Also, in Egypt we lost seven men. Nobody knew about it. There was no press like now. We didn't have emergency chutes like they have now."

Four went out because they are on Static-chutes not Para-chutes. Para-chute means you pull a rip cord to release the chute. A Static-chute, you have your chute and your static line coming out the back. You hook on to a strong point on the plane. It's the weight of your body as you go out that breaks the ties, that allows the chute to open in the right order. Four men went out when that static line broke. The stick was going, 1, 2,3, 4. Four had gone before they could stop it.

Another two were Policemen, red caps. I don't know what they do now but then, everybody had a rifle that strapped across their body. In the stick it's your job to check the man in front of you and make sure his static line is running free. On these two occasions it wasn't done because the static line was inside the (rifle) strap. So, they went out and hung themselves."

Cyril commented early in his Paratrooper story that jumping out of aeroplanes was a dangerous occupation. There was one more sad event he bore witness to.

"There was one Roman candle I saw. Again, no emergency chute. One of the things when you're parachuting, you're taught how to keep compact. So, it's like that until your chute opens. If you stick a leg out, into the slip stream, the wind will catch you and start

you start twisting. If you spin up enough there's not enough canopy to descend and you fall. From a distance I saw the stick going out in a line and you saw this one spinning and dropping."

Much like his fellow Paratroopers, he didn't ponder on such occurrences. Understandable considering that they were serving in an airborne regiment, where parachuting was an integral part of the modus operandi.

"You're in a dangerous (job). It wouldn't stop me. I suppose I was programmed. We were disciplined. We were given an order and obeyed it and that was how they would choose Paras."

Cyril's time in Egypt didn't only consist of drops, drills and exercises. There was a reason the Paras were in the country and as tensions with the Egyptian nationalists increased, the Paratroopers were brought to operational readiness.

"I remember being in the desert and being shown by a finger drawn in the sand, King Farouk's airport. Our job when we got there was to take the control tower. We were put into quarantine twenty-four hours before, where you couldn't communicate with anybody outside. We thought we were going at six o'clock the following morning but again it didn't happen."

After the stand down, Cyril's time with 1 Para was drawing to an end. He was approaching the end of his two-year period of conscription.

"That was when I got demobbed. I came home then. I went into the tenth battalion, Parachute regiment, TA."

Territorial Army

In a quirk of fate, The 10th battalion, Parachute regiment was formed in 1943 in the Suez Canal Zone. Exactly where Cyril's National Service had ended. The battalion jumped at Arnhem during Operation Market Garden and was virtually wiped out. Following the war, it was gradually built up as a reserve battalion. By 1951 it was at a strength of about 300 men and was based in London. Therefore, it was the natural place for Cyril to serve his reserve commitment.

"It was three and a half years compulsory or four years voluntary. If you did four years voluntary you got paid, three and a half you didn't. So obviously everybody volunteered for four years. So, I was transferred from to ten Para."

Cyril's Territorial Army certificate records his transfer into the TA occurred at Charlton, SE London on 20th May 1952.

The reserve commitment required Cyril to complete two weeks training every year and attend regular drill nights. During the fortnight's training, Cyril would have to undertake several parachute jumps, which took place in the UK and West Germany.

“There were drill halls all around and you had to do three or four nights a month, to get paid. You did weapons training and had lectures on whatever new was coming up.”

Cyril remembers one annual camp in Germany.

“We parachuted. We were the enemy, and we had to take a bridge on the River Weser”.

Cyril’s amateur boxing career

“I started in the cadets as a light welterweight. By the time I joined though, I was twelve stone. I boxed for the battalion. Your first, second and third battalions were always competing. Also inter company boxing. I didn’t go beyond inter brigade. I just liked it.”

Life back in Civvy street

“When I came out of the Army I could not settle back in the kitchens. The whole time I was in the Army I was under canvas, not inside at all. I knew the kitchen wasn’t what I wanted for the rest of my life. I was working the night guard at the Dorchester and got home about half two in the morning. My brother had left a newspaper open. ‘Join the London Fire Brigade’. I thought I fancy that.”

London Fire Brigade

“So that’s exactly what I did. I joined the London Fire Brigade and was in there for twenty-five years. I loved every minute of it and looked forward to going to work. There was a lot of former navy personnel in. That’s where they got the Firemen from. The whole Fire Brigade was ‘Watches’, Knots and lines. Naval sort of things.”

In his personal life, Cyril was fortunate to find love.

“In between leaving the Army and joining the Fire Brigade I met Sally. We got married and had twins, Richard and Rachel. They both went into the RAF!”

Wales

Cyril and his wife Sally moved to Wales in 1982.

“Sally and I always felt that we’d like a small holding. When I retired from the Fire Brigade after twenty-five years, we sold up in Essex and bought a small holding in Brynamman. We had Welsh mountain ponies and part bred Arabs. We bred ponies that won the riding class at the Royal Welsh. We were there sixteen years from 1982 to 1997. Then we moved here.”

Footnote

This narrative account preserves the memory of service to the nation, primarily focusing on an account of National Service.

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