

# FROM THE THAMES TO THE TIGRIS

## THE WESTMINSTER DRAGOONS AT WAR OP TELIC – IRAQ 2003



## **The Westminster Dragoons at War in Arabia – Again**

### **2Lt Conn MacEvilly**

In mid-January every member of the WDs received notice that they were being called up for war. The possibility of that happening to us had been live for several months, as our expertise in nuclear, biological and chemical reconnaissance and decontamination had obvious relevance to any plan concerning Iraq. Still, the day we received our mobilisation papers was a solemn one.

It was the first time the Westminster Dragoons had been called up since 1939 and it was being done in haste. We were to amalgamate with our brothers and sisters in A (Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry) Sqn, under the command of their OC, Maj Dominic Guinness. Augmented by 24 drivers from the Royal Logistical Corps, we became Y Sqn, Joint NBC Regiment.

Our preparations in England during February were frantic. By the start of March, we and our vehicles were in the wastelands of northern Kuwait. We trained hard, wearing our NBC protective suits and respirators in the desert heat, as the build-up to fight and talks to avert war went on.

The Joint NBC Regiment was an asset for the use of 1(UK) Division as a whole. Consequently, Y Sqn would be used to assist in nearly every aspect of the divisional plan.

The plan was this. British land forces would advance into Iraq on three axes at once (see map): to the east, the Royal Marines would proceed up the Shatt-Al-Arab waterway and into the Al Faw peninsula; in the centre, 7 Armoured Brigade would strike at Iraqi forces near Safwan and Az Zubayr before tackling Basra; while to the west, 16 Air Assault Brigade would rush to seize the Rumaila oilfields.

On 12 March, the squadron was split, with sections and individuals dispersed throughout the division. The main dispositions were:

- 2Lt Jake Phillips (W Sqn) kept two sections of his troop and was tasked with providing NBC decontamination cover to the divisional support group and SHQ
- 2Lt Conn MacEvilly (W Sqn) was sent with a section-plus to augment G Sqn JNBCR, who would protect 16 Air Assault Brigade during its move into Iraq
- 2Lt Mike Dalyell (A Sqn) went with a section-plus to Camp Viking, the jump-off point for elements of the Royal Marines, to provide decontamination capability there
- Lt Simon Keyes (A Sqn) took two sections to D Sqn JNBCR, who would accompany 7 Armoured Brigade

The day of the ground assault came. As the coalition forces advanced, we passed trigger points at which it was expected that chemical or biological weapons would be used against us. It was daunting to know in advance each time that a threshold of that sort was about to be crossed, given what our job would have been if we had faced retaliation. But although we had many such moments, the direst news never came.

A couple of days after Baghdad fell, Y Sqn was gathered in from across the theatre and re-rolled as infantry. Our mission was to assist in the peace support operations in the Basra region, enabling the Paras and Royal Irish to move further north. The majority were sent to the village of Muzaybilah, where Capt Nall and Lt Keyes each commanded a troop scaled to platoon strength; others went with D Sqn to Ad Dayr on the road south to Basra, while the remainder were sent with G Sqn to Al Qurnah, a town of 20,000 on the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates.

The WDs who stayed with G Sqn were placed, along with 20 regulars, under my command. Like the other cavalry platoons, we carried out a range of infantry peacekeeping tasks: day and night patrols (in vehicles and on foot), guarding key sites such as hospitals, school and public buildings, chasing and impounding stolen cars, confiscating weapons, travelling around obtaining information about humanitarian needs, and so on. It was one of the most rewarding experiences of our lives, yet many of us have never worked harder. The reception we had, especially during foot patrols, was warm: day after day we were thanked and applauded.



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Most of us returned to the UK at the end of May. Some volunteered to stay on. Re-acclimatising has been less difficult than we had expected, in large part because we were so lucky that we did not have to face the worst but also because of our pride in what we had achieved.

In the articles that follow, nine dragoons describe aspects of the squadron's story. They can be no more than snapshots: every member of Y Sqn has a dozen other tales to tell. All photographs are by members of the squadron unless otherwise indicated.



*2Lt Phillips finally convinces SSgt Birch to join him in his favourite wartime hobby: pretending to be sitting outside a Chelsea pub, watching girls*



*2Lt MacEvilly in Al Qurnah, on the banks of the Shatt-Al-Arab. Or is it Marbella? pic: Maj A Phipps*

## 1. Getting the Brown Envelope

### Tpr Philip Atkinson, now Officer Cadet Atkinson of A (Royal Scot) Coy, 52<sup>nd</sup> Lowland Regiment



The recruiting material tells us that the TA soldier is ready at a moment's notice. Accountant one day – highly trained killer the next. But for all the bravado, few who take the oath reasonably expect that their training will ever be called into practice. Instead, their military skills will lie dormant and unrealised as untapped potential.

So when the brown paper envelopes dropped onto mats in mid January, Britain set in motion the largest mobilisation of her reserve forces since the Second World War, establishing a precedent which changes absolutely the nature and character of the TA – and left most WDs stunned.

Not that this figured particularly highly in the minds of the Westminster Dragoons. After attending to domestic matters, WDs addressed the singular challenge of equipping themselves with 'Gucci' kit by buying out Silverman's of their army surplus stock. Others embarked upon the more radical step of getting married. All prepared themselves for the unknown.

The unknown turned out to be an old munitions works at Chilwell, reincarnated as a mobilisation centre and possessed of that cheery sort of atmosphere that only 30 years of lethal weapons manufacture can bring. It was there that W and A Squadron, with attachments from the RLC, became Y Squadron.

Bodies were probed, kit was issued and freedom was signed away in a series of evolutionary steps that saw the WDs transition from Volunteer to Regular. Some amused themselves by asking the question: "So what do you do for a living?" Reply: "Why, I'm in the Army .... What about you?" Answer: "I'm in the Army as well!" A joke which wore thin the moment we realised that regulars were condemned to a diet of freeze-baked sausage rolls.

But it was with a resolute heart that 140-ish men and women puffed up with that air of confidence that only a full set of temperate climate combats for use in the desert can bring, boarded the bus and headed for Grantham.



*Y Sqn Jt NBC Regt, suited and booted for desert warfare*

## 2. Knook Camp – Y Sqn Begins to Take Shape (an e-mail) Tpr Martin Hill, now Pte Hill of A (Royal Scot) Coy, 52<sup>nd</sup> Lowland Regiment



The army must have spent a lot of time looking for the most dreadful place possible to put a poor unsuspecting TA unit. The camp is tucked into such a tight Wiltshire valley that mobile phone reception is restricted to odd points - a square meter on top of a skip, a funny handshake outside the guardhouse, etc. No internet connection, no bog roll and a dead rat in the showers called Arthur.

But we still have standards. With all these posh educated people amongst us, we now eat at the 'restaurant' or 'cafe', shoot with assault 'purdys', and drive 'cars'. Even the support crews, Scouse drivers and engineers have started greeting each other with 'aih, hellaih'.

We have almost finished more not-so-basic training, although as yet have done nothing to do with our actual role 'in theatre'. For bayonet practice on Wednesday we were supposed to run around getting aggressive (enough to ban us from going out in case we suddenly start stabbing people). Since our average age is ne-ne-ne-ninety five, we shouted a bit, stabbed a few straw dummies, got tired and sore, and went out for a quiet pint and pipe by the open fire at the local. The last couple of days we have been out on the ranges, herding lead in the freezing cold.

Our new cars are much better - 'Wolf' Land Rovers, 2.5 tdi (vroom vroom), power steering, working heating, comfy chairs, etc. We spent the first few days here fitting them out with all the shiny kit we could rip off our old fleet and loading them up with as much contraband as we could squeeze in, before sending them off to Marchwood for shipping. We must now try to remember which fuel tank has the brandy in it, and which the diesel ...

We've got Anthrax! It's great! The upper arm came up in a big red splotchy thing, some couldn't move their arms, lots of nausea, flu-like symptoms (oh no, we've all got malaria) and general yucky-feelingness. Other side effects are an overwhelming desire to wear green, waking up before dawn, spouting continuous verbal drivel, and for those of you who remember Bullshot Drummond, acute patriotism and compulsive saluting. And this is just the first jab; we have two more to go!

It's now two weeks since we were mobilised (a lifetime ago) and I think we're all feeling that it has been an interesting annual camp but that it's time to go home for a couple of weeks rest before considering the next weekend's exercise ...



*A WD (Tpr Edward Bowen) looking warm and comfortable outside some of the Army's premier facilities*

### 3. Kuwait and the Build-Up to War Operations Sgt Adam Topol



*Decon practice in front of leftovers from the previous war*



Having arrived in Kuwait from the UK in the dead of night on 3 March 2003, courtesy of the RAF, the squadron was moved from the airport to the divisional transit centre out in the featureless Kuwaiti desert and from there to the JNBCR at Camtelia Lines the next morning.

During the first few days Y Sqn tasted the hostility of the desert. Strong desert winds ripped tent canvas, so goggles or some form of eye protection needed to be worn constantly. One of the worst storms (straight out of the film *The Mummy*) blew up the day we started working on our newly-arrived vehicles. Sand was blown into everything and we had to work with limited visibility. This was a hard way to get used to the environment and acclimatise.

After receiving its vehicles and operational equipment, Y Sqn had to ready both equipment and personnel in preparation for likely military action in Iraq. We got down to some serious work on fully preparing our vehicles, radios, operational equipment and ourselves in the little time that we suspected we had from arrival in theatre before going to war operations.

A training programme was established and Y Sqn started to exercise at all levels. In very little time we had to learn to work as a team (regardless of whether a soldier originally came from A, W or the RLC) and this soon started to bear fruit especially at section and troop level. Training included operation of equipment, movement and leaguer drills, operational and thorough decon drills, local defence and battlefield discipline. Possibly one of the hardest factors to get used to was working in full IPE and respirators, as even in March the temperatures were as high as 32 degrees in the daytime. Although difficult this did not prove insurmountable.

During this period, RHQ JNBCR and Y Sqn disseminated the general outline on how the invasion of Iraq would proceed, likely battle plans and the phases of this war operation.

On 12 March 2003, with short notice and in the middle of the night, some sections were issued orders to detach from Y Sqn to reinforce a number of JNBCR units with the fighting brigades spread throughout the divisional order of battle. Due to the late notification of detachment, only our Troop Leader Lt Phillips had the opportunity to wish us well as we departed into the unknown, and so on a clear desert night we dispersed to new locations, units and taskings with war looking ever more imminent.

#### 4. With G Sqn from G-Day to DALLAS/TAMPA Tpr Jay Hairsine



We had been training hard with G Sqn for just a week when the tempo and atmosphere suddenly changed. Where once there had been a couple of helicopter overflights each night, now there were swarms, their warning lights ominously inactive and their cabins lit only by the eerie glow of the pilots' night vision goggles. The desert around Camp Eagle was churned up by Challenger 2s; despatch riders criss-crossed the trackways in haste.

We were told to make the last of our satphone calls home. Nerve agent protection system tablets and morphine were handed out. The lingering sense of unreality was dispelled when we finally received our ammunition: 300 rounds of 5.56mm each, plus link for our GPMGs and grenades. And we knew we were *certainly* going to war when they served us roast chicken and ice cream for supper instead of nondescript stew.

The squadron formed up alongside row after row of the rest of 16 Air Assault Brigade near to Camp Eagle IV. After a tense last night and breakfast, we were off. It took three staggered moves – marshalling area, motorway, then forward assembly area – to get us to just south of the border. Each time we stopped we spent most of the time leaping into hastily-dug shell scrapes as surface-to-surface missiles thudded into Kuwait.

A breach in the berm had been made the previous night by the Royal Engineers. There was no sign of any NBC attack on it, which meant that ground forces were free to move into Iraq: G-Day was on. At the border, the commander of each vehicle had to dismount and make his invasion on foot. In front of us lay the Rumaila Oilfields. Some wellheads were ablaze but the gas/oil separation plants, whose destruction would have been an environmental and economic disaster, were still intact.

Although the ground to either side of route DALLAS was mined, the road itself was not. We made good progress, reaching our objective by the close of day. We sat at the junction of DALLAS and route TAMPA, ready to tackle contamination if it happened. All around, war proceeded: convoys of US forces stretching for miles made their way past us; in the distance we could hear artillery, while much closer the EOD dealt with the antipersonnel mines strewn about. A storm flooded the landscape. We listened to the progress of the war on the radio and in O groups, praying that if the moment came where we were called on, we would do our job well and all make it through.



*Best buddies if the chemicals hit: G Sqn Fuchs and MPDSes roll out on G-Day pic: Maj A Phipps*





*What the Iraqis otherwise failed to do: part of the Rumaila Oilfields on fire on G-Day*



*Looking relaxed and carefree, 2Lt MacEvilly takes his self-purchased boots for a spin in the Rumaila Oilfields on G-Day*

## 5. Protecting DSG as the Scuds Rain Down Tpr Robin Rowe



The war started, not with shock and awe, but rather with a good night's sleep. The expected flypast by an armada of coalition aircraft and the rolling thunder of explosions from the north never happened. However, the next day our routine was changed completely.

As Land Rover horns started blowing one second on, one second off, there was a brief moment when everyone stared wide-eyed at the person standing next to them before grappling for their respirator. The drill had become second nature through training but it was still a shock to realise that this time it was for real as we dived into our

shell scrapes. The next thing we knew, we were bugging out: as the decon section covering the Divisional Support Group, within 5 minutes of getting the call we were racing down the dirt road in a cloud of dust.

It was only as we were on our way that we were briefed that a Scud had come down and we were being stood to, ready to decontaminate the Fuchs that was doing a chemical recce on the crash site.

It turned out to be a false alarm. The guy living in the tent at the grid the Fuchs was sent to was unaware that he has just had a Scud land on his head – and to this day, nobody has told me where that Scud actually landed.

We spent the next 48 hours putting on and taking off our respirators. One soon becomes blasé about the presence of danger and although our drills were no less hurried our hearts ceased to speed up quite so much as we went about them. Part of the reason for our lack of fear was the apparent arbitrariness of the alarms. They were supposed to sound while the Scuds were five minutes away. It was quite surprising, therefore, to hear them go off about ten minutes after we had seen one slam into the ground about a kilometre from our vehicles. Occasionally, I was almost glad of the alerts as they allowed me to 'accidentally' knock the chess board I was playing at and so avoid yet another defeat at the hands of Tpr Ewing (on the left in the photograph above) in our ongoing desert chess tournament.

At night, many of us became so irritated with being woken up every hour for an alert that we simply put noddie suit, respirator, body armour and helmet on and curled up in our shell scrapes. It's a surprisingly comforting feeling being so well protected whilst you sleep.



*G-Day minus 1: Cpl Bowater demonstrates the protective effect of a Land Rover during a real, live Scud bombardment*

## 6. At the FPIC Cpl Andy Brown



For a medic, life at the FPIC (Forces Press And Information Centre) was actually quite involved. Y Sqn as a whole was kept busy improving the defensive berms and gunpits, mounting patrols and carrying out VCPs. Our position at the old UN compound on the main Umm Qasr-Basra road, a few kilometres northeast of the town of Safwan, meant we were an obvious target for Iraqi civilians and POWs wanting medical help or food. Most of the squadron was by now together again, along with the QM Tech's packet, the REME, a PBDS, an SMT, and the regimental training team!

Some distraction was provided by patrols to the local farms, escorting Media Ops and press people on fact-finding trips. The area was much greener than Kuwait, with tomatoes seemingly the main crop from the irrigated fields. The people were poor but not destitute, and genuine in their welcome. They were very pleased to see us but reluctant to be photographed, fearing UN action would end the coalition mission, allowing Saddam's people to return to wreak revenge. We saw many scars said to be from torture, and photographs of family members "disappeared". During these visits I would carry out basic health checks, and end up running impromptu clinics – with few resources it's amazing what rations and sweets will do in place of medicine!

The most memorable incident occurred in the middle of the night on the pitch dark road outside the compound. A vehicle stopped and its occupants laid what appeared to be a body in the road! The squadron stood-to, fearing some form of surprise attack, and myself and L/Cpl Bob Mead (the A Sqn medic) were woken up to attend. We didn't speak Arabic and they didn't speak English but by red torchlight I eventually discovered a woman in her mid 20s in the throes of having a miscarriage. My journalist translator arrived and we did what we could before sending her on for treatment in Umm Qasr – but for a time we thought we might have to deliver a baby, in the dark, on the road, with hardly any equipment!

Living alongside the press proved an interesting, if mixed, experience. When seeing POWs and civilians I often worked with a journalist who spoke Arabic and helpfully acted as translator, but some other members of the press were more of a hindrance, attempting to interfere in my treatment or film inappropriately.

After about ten days, elements of the regiment began to arrive for training in new roles. Some of Y Sqn were involved in this, being trained as Operational Support Teams for the new Light Monitoring Teams, or brushing off their armour skills to join Fuchs crews. I, with three others, left the squadron at this point to join the Special Intelligence Team, not re-joining the squadron until the move back to Kuwait and Camp Eagle.



*VCP at the FPIC*

## 7. Infantry Ops in Al Qurnah with G Sqn Tpr Edward Bowen



The war ended with no real celebration or excitement but filtered into a drift of uncertainty. Were we to be sent home and reunited with our families or tasked with assisting the Americans with their capture and securing of Baghdad? Eventually answers appeared from the top, somewhat diluted and vague, but this part of the tour proved for many of us to be the most enjoyable and rewarding.

Three of us remaining with G Squadron from the Westminster Dragoons (Cpl Bowater, Tpr Hill and me) were to work alongside 20 soldiers of the RTR and RAF Regiment under 2Lt MacEvilly's command in Gallipoli Troop (named by the OC after one of the WDs' battle honours). The other, Tpr Hairsine, was given the role of OC's driver.

Our job was to assist the unit with peacekeeping in Al Qurnah and the area around it. We resided in the old Ba'ath Party headquarters, which once set up proved to be luxury compared to the open desert we were used to. Whilst showering and sanitation remained basic at best, it certainly brought joy to see fresh food for the first time in almost six weeks.

It was evident from carrying out our various tasks that the Iraqi people rejoiced about our presence. Children would flurry around our passing vehicle and foot patrols, which were shadowed by flocking people, curious and excited.

The Troop's rotations were changed every three days: guarding the Ba'ath Party headquarters, our new accommodation; protecting the local hospital; patrolling the town and surrounding areas. Patrolling the streets gave us an opportunity to work under our section commanders again. Vehicle checkpoints were carried out in accordance with our orders along with house searches and providing a visible presence to locals. There was a tremendous sense of self worth as we helped sort out their problems and disputes. Never before had we seen people fighting over a glass of fresh water, or become involved in evicting a homeless family from a chicken hut in which they were squatting because they had threatened to murder its owner in front of the Troop Leader!

As time progressed the locals volunteered information about weapon sites, local militia and potential hot spots. There was so much needed to rebuild their infrastructure and very often we lacked the resources and manpower to assist. We would have loved to do more but, stretched to the limit, we could merely watch them continue to destroy their environment. As we left there, we couldn't help thinking they expected us to do it all for them. Time will undoubtedly tell what the future holds, although they are surely now in charge of their own destiny. Nevertheless our thoughts and prayers remain with the people in Al Qurnah.



*G Sqn's Gallipoli Troop. WDs: Cpl Bowater (rear, second from left), Tpr Bowen (rear, third from right), Tpr Hill (front, furthest right) and the troop leader, 2Lt MacEvilly (centre foreground)*



*Marsh Arab boatman on the Euphrates, with part of Al Qurnah on the far bank* pic: Maj A Phipps



*Warm welcome at Al Medinah, west of Al Qurnah*

## 8. Infantry Ops in Muzaybilah Cpl Paul Dryden

On Friday the 18th of April, my 37th birthday, we deployed north from Shu'aybah Airfield near Az Zubayr to Muzaybilah on the Tigris, to take on our new internal security and peace support role. There we met Support Coy of 1 PARA, whom we were relieving, and set about the task of taking over the school where we were to be based. The Squadron was split into three troops, with an SHQ/SQMS packet. Each troop was allocated to the task of Patrols, QRF or Guard, rotating every few days. SHQ was responsible for foot patrols in the village itself.

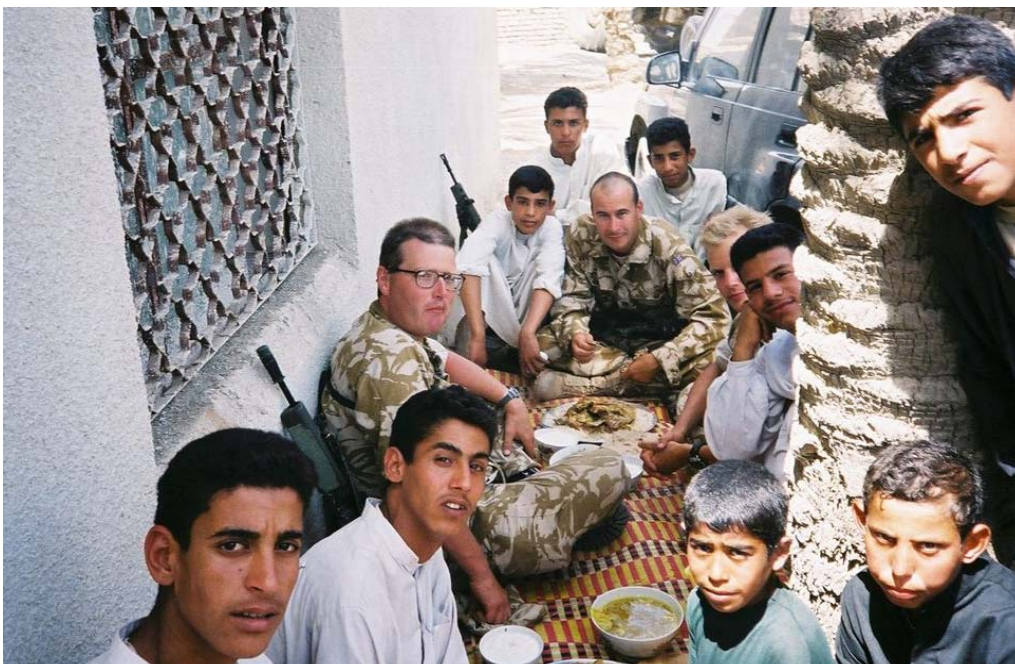
Our task was to police a large area on both banks of the Tigris, about 40km by 20km. Our aim was to allow the Iraqis to return to normal life as soon as possible. But what was normal? The marshland, of which our maps showed the area was made up, had been almost entirely drained. Trees were evident largely as stumps and the only cultivation that we saw was right on the margin of the Tigris, here a turbid and sluggish body of water, about the width of the Thames at Henley. To our east, especially in the old Iran-Iraq war battlefields, the parched and blackened landscape looked like sepia photographs of the Western Front after the guns had fallen silent. No colour, no life. Almost everyone we spoke to relied on the "oil for food" programme ration, and few had any real way of supporting themselves.

The three main worries of the local population were security, water and electricity. Muzaybilah had never had piped water; most villages in our area relied on tanker deliveries, and most of the tankers had been pinched. Bandits abounded, and there were a lot of hold-ups and car-jackings. To get the grid running again, the electricity workers also needed security, and so we began a series of patrols and visits to reassure the population and start assembling a local council.

The major event of our time in Muzaybilah was Op GRAND THEFT AUTO where, in conjunction with a very excited heliborne CO, the squadron moved to seize stolen cars and water lorries. Several were recovered, fortunately without a shot being fired, and our compound began to resemble "Honest Dancer's Motors". The success was later tarnished by the use by one of our officers of one of the recovered cars to visit the very village from which it had been lifted.

The final memorable event was a visit to RHQ by the GOC Commanding at around the same time when desert kit arrived at long last – perhaps not a coincidence. More happily, camp-cots and mosquito nets also arrived, and for the last week we slept in luxury, above the camel spiders, ants and other beasties, amongst which we had formerly messed.

Suddenly, our flight date came, and on 2 May we were relieved by D Squadron and headed back south, policemen no more, to Shu'aybah.



*Cpl Dryden (left, in beige) and Cpl Madden brave the threat level for the chance of decent scoff*

## 9. The Slow Trip Home Sgt Adrian Jenkins



On 2 May, Y Sqn (minus those who had decided to extend their period of mobilisation) assembled at the main British support base, Shu'aybah Airfield, southwest of Basra. There we began preparing our vehicles and ourselves for the return to the UK

The entire squadron was parked up in lines, flags flying: the Welsh, the Saltire, the Union and the St George's cross, among others. The other sight of interest was pizza boxes and burger wrappings – lots of them. The Americans had placed two field outlets of Burger King and Pizza Hut in the base. After almost ten weeks of compo diet, it was a welcome relief from the tedium of boil-in-the-bag and melted issued chocolate.

Over the next few days, we cleaned the vehicles, restored and counted the equipment and stocked up on ice creams, Pringles and soft drinks from the EFI. We also had access to e-mail for the first time since arriving in theatre. The last of the goodie parcels sent from home caught up with us.

We drove the vehicles down to the port of Doha, near Kuwait City, where they were parked up to await loading. After that, it was back to the desert – to Camp Eagle, a collection of tents previously inhabited by the Paras. During the day the temperatures inside the canvas reached the high 40s. At night, some of us chose to sleep outside as we had been used to doing for weeks, where it was considerably cooler and fresher.

The dates of the flights were uncertain and we had few duties to do. The CO subjected himself to listening to the views of each person in the squadron (in private interview, so they were frank), while everyone else dozed, chatted, watched films and wrote. Finally, on 11 and 12 May the squadron flew out of Kuwait. By stepping into the clean, air conditioned world of the RAF although we were still in our crusty, hand-washed desert combats, we were taking a leap back to civilian life.

Demobilisation at Chilwell took only a few hours. By 1500 on Sunday 12 May the last of the squadron was on the bus heading back for London. We arrived at Duke of York's just after 1900 and were met by a small welcoming committee, several parents/wives/partners and a camera team from *London Tonight*. We agreed to meet up at the Orange Brewery, the place where I had had my last pre-war beer some ten weeks previously, for our first *Ice Cold In Alex* drink. During the confusion no one had turned up but that was no great loss as it was lovely to be alone with my wife: at that point I had spent more of my marriage with the Army than with her. Soon we were on our way home. We flagged a black cab. Initially, the driver was reluctant to take our fare as it was a long trip. Then he saw my heaps of kit and my healthy glow. Seconds later we were on our way to North London. And when we got home, he declined to take the whole fare.



*The WDs, plus RLC attachments and a couple of RY strays, show off their tans and new uniforms at Shu'aybah Airfield*



*The Westminster Dragoons: Lieutenants Rickett and MacEvelly grump about not having a seat while WO2 Oza wonders whether he has forgotten something*