

AN EXTREMELY FAIR MAN

Dad gave me a lift to the station. Neither of us spoke during the drive: the silence was only broken by the Bruno Brookes show crackling out of the one working speaker of the car radio. Somehow, *Walking On Sunshine* didn't fit my mood. I was extremely nervous about what was waiting to greet me at Harrogate, and Katrina's joyous crooning about her baby loving her wasn't hitting the spot. I didn't feel the love, and it didn't feel good. We got to Victoria Station with 15 minutes to spare. Dad helped me to the platform with my bags. He had to be at work, so he couldn't hang around to see me off. He went to shake my hand, but when he took it, realised that something more than that was required. He pulled me close in to him and hugged me. We stayed like that for a few seconds and when he pulled back, he had tears in his eyes. I'd never seen him cry before and was taken aback so I tried to reassure him.

'I'll be alright, Dad.'

He smiled, with an effort. 'I know, son. Now listen. If this isn't for you, don't be bloody scared to say so. The world's full of people doing jobs they don't like. If it gets too hard, or it doesn't turn out like you thought it would, you can come home and try something else.' I nodded, picking up my cases. 'Mind you,' he said, 'don't give up too easy. I can't imagine that it's going to be pleasant, but us Nugents have never been quitters.'

There it was, that word again. I gave an involuntary shudder and climbed aboard the train. I stashed my bags and went back to the door, pulling the window down.

'Right then, Dad. See you soon, hopefully.'

'OK, son. I need to shoot off to work now anyway. Take care of yourself and keep your head down. Don't get noticed and you'll be alright.' He ruffled my hair with his right hand. 'Go on. Get sat down or you'll lose your seat.'

I looked around and saw that the carriage was starting to fill up. We said our final goodbye and Dad spun smartly on his heel and strode

quickly up the platform. I watched him get to the ticket inspection point, then I shut the window and made my way to the seat.

In the 10 minutes before we left, a few more Harrogate recruits boarded the train. They stuck out like sore thumbs among the commuters, with their new haircuts, uncomfortable shirts and over-abundance of baggage for your average 16-year-old lad. One lad had almost an entire football team of relatives seeing him off: he pulled himself away like a Beatle dodging autograph hunters and boarded the train one carriage down from me. Several others, cutting it fine and with no one to see them off, had to open doors that the guard had already shut to make it on.

When the whistle finally went and the train pulled off, I still had a double seat to myself. I tried to settle down, despite my nerves. I had my travel instructions tucked safely into the arse pocket of my trousers but still took them out every few minutes to check. An hour to Leeds, then we'd change for Harrogate. I spent the entire journey gazing out of the window, attempting to take in a bit of the scenery. Every now and again we'd go through a tunnel and my reflection would stare back at me. It seemed to be saying, 'You daft twat.' The only other thing I remember from our passage through West Yorkshire (apart from feeling sick after eating two Cabana bars back to back), was a sign outside a farm which said, 'Half a pig, fifteen quid.' It seemed to confirm that I was moving from one world to another.

According to my instructions I had 20 minutes at Leeds in which to be on platform 5C, but I ran anyway, blundering through the station with my bags like an old lady with an eye on a jumble-sale bargain. The pointless dash left me with a quarter of an hour to kill so I found an empty bench and sat down, wearily, looking at the silent, waiting train. Gradually, the platform filled with the same young faces, all nervously smoking or introducing themselves to others, hoping to glean snippets about the forthcoming experience to help allay their fears. Just before the train doors hissed open, I was joined by a lad who was struggling with six bags. I immediately started worrying about what I might have forgotten. I had a good look around the platform and took some solace in the fact that, like me, everyone else was averaging two or three cases. I nodded to the lad, a stocky guy with a ginger flat-top. 'Fuckin' hell, mate,' I said. 'You've got a lot of stuff there.'

He looked at me quizzically. 'All essential gear, mate. You only got the two bags then?'

'I've got everything they put on the list,' I said.

'Oh, I didn't go off *their* list. Me Dad's in the Green Howards, so he told me what to take.'

I was going to find out the hard way that being the first soldier in the family had its drawbacks. Knowing someone who'd been through the same training, who could provide hints and tips that would help avoid the pitfalls that I was going to stumble into with every step, would have been useful.

A metallic voice from the train announced the service as the doors opened, and everyone started gathering up his luggage and cramming it onto the two-carriage express. By the time I got on, all the seats were taken, so I dropped my bags and stood by the doors. The train moved off, almost silently. The journey only took half an hour; as we travelled through Burley, Kirkstall, Horsforth, Weeton, Pannal and Oatlands, the mood grew palpably more sombre, and conversation dwindled to a few hushed exchanges. As we slid in to Harrogate station, everyone was waiting, bags in hand, for the stop. We all spilled through the open doors and on to the platform.

As I lumbered down the concourse, I noticed an elderly man in Army uniform. He was holding a clipboard and directing some of the lads who had got off the train before me to go outside. As I drew nearer, I saw that the old codger had a name-tag that read 'Lang' on his chest. He also had a black cane with a metallic end under one arm and a black armband emblazoned in red with the letters 'RP' on the other. I looked him up and down discreetly. He had the gaunt, craggy features of Old Man Steptoe. Before I could speak, the old coot looked up and barked, 'Name?'

'Eddy. Eddy Nugent.'

He scowled at me, and shot back, 'Eddy Nugent, what?'

I panicked, thinking he wanted me to give him more details about myself. 'Eddy Nugent,' I said, 'from Manchester, er, Sir.'

'SIR! Fucking *Sir!* I'm not a fucking "Sir", Nugent. I work for a living. Do you understand?'

No. 'Yes.'

‘Yes, fucking *what?*’ he screeched, pointing at the single chevron on his right arm.

I wasn’t stupid, and I knew that he wanted me to call him by his rank, but I didn’t have a clue what it was. My stomach was in knots: I’d only been off the train for five minutes and I was in the shit already. So I just pulled a rank out of my head.

‘Yes... Corporal.’ Just about the only others that I knew were Squadron Leader, Admiral and Centurion.

‘That’s more like it you horrible, lazy bastard. Now get on that fucking green bus in the car park, and I’ll be watching you, lad.’

I shuffled outside and climbed aboard. The coach was spartan, with uncomfortable, thinly-padded, green bench-seats that had metal rails for headrests. Everyone had a double seat to himself, and nobody was mixing or talking to anyone else. I found a seat and soon after a chubby kid sat down next to me. *At least there’s one guy I can beat on a run*, I thought. It’s amazing what gives you comfort when you think you’re in dire straits.

Once the bus was full, the driver started the engine and the old corporal climbed aboard. The pneumatic doors closed behind him with a hiss and he braced himself in the aisle. When what little conversation there was had died down, he sneered,

‘Right, you little fuckers! You’re in the Army now! So when I speak to you, you will call me “Corporal”. Do you understand?’

‘YES, CORPORAL!’ came the loud reply, in unison. Except for one lad, who deviated from the required response. A tall bloke, two seats in front of me, had also noticed Lance Corporal Lang’s similarity to Steptoe Senior. Instead of shouting ‘Yes, Corporal!’ with the rest of us, he called out, ‘You *dirty* old man,’ in the manner of Harry H. Unfortunately for the would-be comic, by the time we had said our bit, his lone impression was still in full flow, and the ‘old man’ part trailed away into silence. Then he realised just how badly he had fucked up. Lang turned scarlet with rage: he was about an inch away from having steam coming out of his ears, to the accompaniment of the noise from a locomotive whistle. The bus was deathly quiet aside from the occasional suppressed snigger, but the majority of us were shocked into wide-eyed silence. I was just thinking that this would be a smokescreen for my minor altercation, when Lang took a step forward.

‘What’s your fucking name?’ he bellowed at the joker.

‘Smith, Corporal.’

‘Right, Smith. Me and you are going to have fucking words.’

Then to our surprise, Lang just sat down and the bus pulled out of the car park and headed towards camp.

I stared at my troubled reflection in the window as we wound through the light stone houses of the town and out into the dark greenery of the countryside. We climbed a foreboding hill and then headed down a lane with a small housing estate and the huts from *Tenko* on the right. Shortly after that, the camp perimeter came into view on the left. It seemed to be in the middle of nowhere, making it extremely open to the elements.

The bus slowed and we turned through the gates, me gawping at everything – even the guy on gate, because he’d passed basic training and I hadn’t. I was snapped out of my gawping by the bus jolting to a stop outside the guardroom. Then Lang stood up and shouted, ‘Right, Smith! You funny fucker! Get off the shagging bus!’

Smith didn’t move at first and just looked around the bus as if one of us would offer some advice, but we were all as scared as each other and could be of no use. Then Lang called out again, ‘Come on, you cunt. Get the fuck off the fucking bus now!’

Smith slowly stood, and Lang harangued him all the way down the aisle. ‘Take your fucking time, Smith! Don’t hurry whatever you do, you cunt. I’ve got all shagging day!’

Smith sped up and jogged along the aisle and down the steps. Once outside and on the tarmac, Smith was subjected to Lang’s full arsenal of insults. Then, to my horror, he was marched into the guardroom jail at a ridiculously fast pace. A minute or so later, Lang came back out of the building and got back aboard the bus. He looked very smug. ‘Any other comedians?’ he shouted. When there was no reply, the bus set off again, passing a large boiler house with a chimney and a strange round building with a sign saying ‘NAAFI’ outside it before a series of four storey accommodation blocks came into view.

We stopped at the corner of two blocks. Lang read out a list of names. ‘You’re in Scott Squadron,’ he said. ‘Now get off the bus.’

As soon as the Scott Squadron guys filtered down the steps, they were verbally set upon by a group of young junior ranks yelling, 'Hurry the fuck up!' and 'Sort your fucking shit out!'

I watched as they were then herded into one of the blocks and out of sight.

Then Lang read out another list of names; when mine was called out, my heart skipped a beat.

'Right, you lot are Rawson Squadron, so get the fuck off the bus.'

We all stood up and made our way down the aisle. As soon as we hit the Tarmac, another group of blokes, a year or so older than me, sprinted out from the block and started to shout abuse at us. There was a mad scrabble for our cases from the belly of the coach. As soon as I had my baggage, I just turned and followed the person in front of me. There were so many NCOs shouting so much abuse, and so loud, that – as we clambered up the stairs of the block – the hollering seemed to form one unintelligible downpour of swear words and threats. I didn't dare look at any of the instructors, for fear of some unspeakable reprisal.

When we reached the first floor, we were directed through some brown double fire doors. We were told to give our names and lined up along the wall in alphabetical order. We were stood perfectly still and looking above the heads of the NCOs, but they still shouted at us for some imaginary crime, all the while stalking the corridor and eyeballing us menacingly. Before long, another coach-load of recruits turned up and were integrated into our group through the same medium of loud swearing.

We were each assigned a bed – eight of us per room – and then herded back downstairs into the quadrangle formed by the accommodation blocks. After the palaver of trying to form three ranks, we were turned to our left and marched to the cookhouse for our first taste of Army cuisine. None of us were in step and the ripple effect of our pathetic attempt at marching resembled the legwork of a drunken millipede. After a short while, we reached a covered walkway, the approach to the cookhouse. One of the instructors called for the squad to halt, and numerous comedy collisions took place, with some stopping dead and others continuing to march. Our woefully disorganised state earned us more grippings.

‘You useless bastards! You cunts can’t do fuck all! Now line up against the glass wall on the right, and get in single shaggin’ file!’

The desperate, scrabbling transition from three ranks to single file was mayhem but we sort of made it. I ended up in the middle of the line, and we started edging to the cookhouse.

Inside, I sneaked a brief look around. There was an illuminated hot plate with a line of cooks in stained whites standing behind it. Some of the tables had soldiers sitting around them. These blokes looked across at us and laughed whilst making the odd comment about us being a ‘bunch of wankers.’ One of the NCOs caught me looking and was immediately in my face. ‘What the fuck are you looking at, you cunt?’

‘Nothing, Corporal!’ I replied. Luckily he had the same rank as Lang, so I knew what it was.

He pointed to the guys in uniform who were already eating. ‘Don’t you fucking dare look at them, you’re not worthy.’

I don’t know what he expected me to do. If I wasn’t worthy of looking at anybody who was out of basic training, I’d be spending most of my time with my eyes shut. Surely this would raise some serious safety issues, especially when undergoing firearms training. But I just looked ahead of me and said, ‘Yes, Corporal!’

Then he was away to grip someone else for an equally trivial crime.

After a while, I bore down on the hotplate. The meal itself resembled a school dinner, with the usual staples like chips, sausage, pies, beans etc. But the people serving it were very different. As opposed to the red-faced, friendly dinner ladies I’d known in school, these people, while still red-faced, were cantankerous borderline psychotics with all manner of skin disorders. I made a mental note to stay clear of the cornflakes at breakfast. As I moved along the line, I was met with scowls from the chefs to the point where I began to feel that they personally hated me. I just got my scoff as fast as I could and took it to an empty table where I began to eat at a leisurely pace.

I was halfway through my meal when the NCOs stood up and shouted, ‘Right, Rawson Squadron Recruits. Get outside now!’

Not one of us had finished our food, and we looked around at each other in dismay. But the instructor who had just shouted the

order, reiterated his point. 'FUCKING GET OUTSIDE NOW, RAWSON RECRUITS!'

Spurred on by the level of the NCO's rage, we all dashed for the exits, even blokes who were just coming off the hotplate with a tray full of food. Our first lesson had been learned: get your food eaten as fast as possible, because the NCOs went through first, and as soon as they had finished theirs it was time to leave.

This lesson meant that, come the next meal, there was plenty of physical jostling for a good place in the queue. If you were last to get served, table manners were suspended and you ate as you went down the hotplate.

Once back outside in the walkway, we were put into three ranks again and 'marched' out past the back of the accommodation where the bus had dropped us off. From there, we went back down the road in the direction of the guardroom, looking like Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. On passing the boiler house again, we turned right down towards a large, derelict-looking building and came to a shambling halt at its doors. I noticed the word 'CINEMA' above them – an ambitious claim, I thought. To the left of the main entrance was a wall-mounted poster, informing us all excitedly that *Trading Places* was coming soon. It was only three years after everyone else had seen it.

I still wasn't used to the constant yelling, and jumped a little when one of the instructors roared, 'Front rank, file in.' There was a picosecond's pause, before he screamed, 'Get a fucking wiggle on, you lazy fucking gobshites.'

Harried witless, the front rank did as it was told, followed by the middle and rear, under constant vocal bombardment. Glancing timidly left and right as we went through the foyer, I could see that, as cinemas went, it was a bare-arsed affair. Dour shades of purple and blue reigned, with none of the usual accoutrements like a popcorn stand or a gorgeous, thick-skulled ticket lady. We were herded down the central aisle to the front and were instructed via points, threats and grunts to file into the first empty row. Sitting down in those surprisingly comfy seats was bliss, regardless of the abuse, and I took the liberty of having a quick look round. On the wall to my left was a collection of dark wooden panels, listing, in gold lettering, the names and tenure dates of all the Commanding

Officers of the college. On the right were similar boards giving the same information for the AT RSMs. Once sat down, our numbers seemed quite impressive. With the four Squadrons' intakes combined, there were about 400 of us. The NCOs lined the back wall, glaring. One of them caught me looking over. 'Can I get you a fucking choc-ice?' he sneered.

I turned round quickly and tried to sink into my seat, just as a huge man came striding down the aisle. He was at least six-foot-three and he marched so purposefully that he made it to the front in about eight paces. He turned and regarded us grimly. A hush descended, to a new level beyond mere silence. He opened up in a Glaswegian baritone which sounded like he'd been gargling glass. 'Good afternoon, gentlemen.' Without waiting for a response, he continued. 'My name is Company Sergeant Major Hendricks of Penney Squadron.' He turned to stare at the Penney Recruits who were sitting to his left near the back. 'Those of you in my squadron will get to know me very well over the next two years. I'm not very good with names, so those of you whose names I can recall will either have done something to impress me, or acted the cunt. Either way, you'll remember me.'

Hendricks was scaring the shit out of me at a distance of 40 feet. This was getting to be a like a bad joke: every newly introduced member of the DS was worse than the previous one. It was both well-choreographed and utterly depressing.

His voice shook me out of my fugue. 'The rest of you will meet your Company Sergeant Majors soon. They are all as nice as me, so you won't be disappointed. You're here now to meet the two most important men in your life for the next two years. You will be addressed first by the RSM, and secondly by the Camp Commandant. When the RSM walks into the room, I will give you the command, 'Sit *up*'. You will then sit up so straight that all your vertebrae will fuse simultaneously. Understood? Good.'

He moved to the side of the cinema, and stood, poker straight, with his eyes looking expectantly towards the entrance. There was utter silence, punctuated only by a tiny, nervous fart from someone in front of me. Then I heard the foyer door being pushed open and glanced at Sergeant Major Hendricks just in time to hear him shout his command. The entire room stiffened,

400 sets of peripheral vision trying to clock the RSM as he boomed down the aisle. As he got to the front, he executed a perfect parade ground halt, no doubt doing additional damage to an already threadbare carpet. He then spun round, in a perfect about-turn and slammed his right foot down to complete the movement, almost putting it through the floor. It was a full three seconds before he spoke and he cast his gaze critically on a sweeping panorama of the room. He wasn't as tall as Hendricks, but he was built like an all-in wrestler. His stable belt was wrapped round a prodigious beer gut, which was straining to escape both above and below it, his pace stick was jammed tight under his left arm and his boots were shinier than it was possible for non-metallic objects to be. He obviously subscribed to the little man-big hat school of thought, and he peered at us from under an enormous peak, denying us eye contact and increasing his aura of danger. His voice, when it emerged, took us by complete surprise.

'Good afternoon to you all. My name is Warrant Officer First Class, Regimental Sergeant Major Banning, of the Coldstream Guards.'

There was a trace of a Cornish accent, but his tone was light and almost too quiet to hear clearly.

'I am responsible for your discipline and well-being whilst serving at this training establishment. I am an extremely fair man, with high standards both given and demanded. If you try your hardest and endeavour to honour the words in your oath to Her Majesty the Queen, you will find me to be no enemy.'

That sounded fair enough to me. His delivery was calm and measured and made me feel that perhaps there were small pockets of sanity existing in the place. But, of course, there was more, and it made my dread return immediately. He removed his pace stick from under his arm and pointed it in our general direction. With no change in his manner, he said, 'However, if any of you besmirch the good name of this College, or bring the smallest aspect of the Army into disrepute, I will stick this pace stick right up your arse. It will need two strong men armed with bolt croppers to retrieve it, and when they do it won't be me that cleans the shit off it.'

It was at that supremely inopportune moment that someone coughed loudly. The result was predictable. The RSM turned to face him, and asked him quietly, 'Do you think it's polite to interrupt a Regimental Sergeant Major while he's speaking?'

The guilty lad was beyond speech, and simply sat and stared, and waited for whatever was coming next. The RSM raised his voice to the Senior NCOs at the back of the room. 'Sergeant Bolton, please remove this man to the guardroom and ensure that he understands his folly.'

For the capital crime of performing a reflex bodily action, the guilty party was ordered into the aisle and marched away, probably forever.

As if nothing had happened, RSM Banning made a polite enquiry. 'Would anyone else like to cough?' He took our terrified hush as a No. 'There you have it in a nutshell, boys. Stick to the rules and you'll have no problem. Fuck me or any of my staff about, and you will receive no quarter.' He glanced at his watch. 'The Commandant will be entering the building shortly. I will give the same command to sit up that Company Sergeant Major Hendricks gave you earlier. Make sure your response is equally observed.'

He moved to stand by CSM Hendricks and adopted an identical pose. Despite all the fear that they'd managed to instil into me, It was at this point that I started laughing at my predicament – internally, of course. They looked such a pair of cunts stood there. You'd have thought God himself was about to walk through the door, if their chin-jutting expressions were anything to go by. I got the sneaking suspicion that thinking this way was going to be a useful release valve.

We were all anticipating the sound of the doors opening, and when they did, we made ready to brace ourselves up after the RSM's command.

'Sit up.'

From the back, it must have looked like an attempt to break the 'most people being simultaneously executed in Texas' record as the Commandant moved quietly down to the front. As he neared the RSM, Banning sprang to life and made a show of marching three feet towards the Commandant before completing another

exaggerated drill movement. In tones barely higher than whispers, the RSM informed the CO that the new intake were awaiting his instruction. The RSM then retreated to his initial position by the stage after being thanked by the CO. Whilst this short pantomime was being enacted, I checked out the Commandant. He was shorter again than the RSM, probably about five foot seven, and his build was slight. He was in Number Two dress and looked pretty snappy. A pair of well-polished, brown shoes finished the look. The only person I'd ever seen dressed like this before was the Brigadier from *Doctor Who*.

The CO removed his hat and turned to face his audience, knocking us completely off-guard by producing a huge smile.

'Sit at ease please, boys,' he invited. I only relaxed a fraction, letting my shoulders slump slightly. He continued to smile without speaking, as though mentally preparing an off-the-cuff speech. After a few seconds, looking up and down the rows of shell-shocked faces, he began.

'Good afternoon, and welcome to Uniacke Barracks, home of the Royal Corps of Signals Army Apprentice College Harrogate. My name is Lieutenant Colonel De La Tour and I am the Commandant of this fine establishment.'

His accent hovered somewhere near 'wannabe aristocrat,' like he was putting it on a bit. At school, I'd once had to drop off a note at the staff room and I'd gone in, after knocking, to find Mr Lever talking to his bank manager on the phone. When he was teaching us French he had a slight West Lancashire accent, but the bloke at Barclays must have thought he was talking to a minor royal. It seemed like De La Tour was labouring under a similar verbal idiosyncrasy.

He looked at the RSM and then back to us. 'By now, you've met a couple of the personalities that make up our little family. The thing that you must always bear in mind is that we are here to help you in your undertaking to become trained soldiers. None of my staff are paid to mess you around unnecessarily and they will endeavour to help you find your way without having to resort to threats or punishment.'

Now I was confused. This didn't seem to tally up with anything we'd experienced so far.

‘However, if you are failing to achieve the standards laid down by me, then I fully expect my NCOs and Senior NCOs to encourage you – along, perhaps, with some gentle chiding.’

The RSM’s face was totally inscrutable, but I could see that Hendricks was cracking into an almost imperceptible grin. Just like the Queen supposedly thinks the world smells of fresh paint, the Commandant had a slightly lopsided view of ‘his’ College. As soon as he was around, the shouting and abuse stopped and was replaced by constructive criticism.

‘There will be times when some of you feel homesick or that you are simply unable to continue, for many reasons. If you find yourself in this position, inform any permanent member of staff and you will receive a sympathetic hearing.’

The light chuckle coming from the line of NCOs at the back, was quickly strangled by a ferocious look from the RSM.

‘Don’t forget to try and enjoy this experience. You are embarking on an adventure that will see you emerge in just under two years as trained soldiers and tradesmen in our esteemed Corps. It’s not for the faint-hearted, and no doubt a few of you will fall by the wayside, but those of you who complete your training will have gained something to be fiercely proud of. I’ll now leave you in the capable hands of the RSM, and would just like to congratulate you all on choosing a career in the Royal Corps of Signals. Carry on RSM.’

‘Sit *up*,’ bellowed Banning, and we complied immediately as the Commandant took a leisurely stroll back up the cinema aisle, smiling.

As soon as he was through the double doors and out of earshot, the dark cloud that had temporarily been dispersed returned with vigour. Of course, it was Army policy that none of the NCOs or the RSM would publicly disagree with anything the Commandant said, particularly in front of junior ranks. Nevertheless, the sniggers and grins made it quite apparent, to anyone with the tiniest amount of perception, that they all thought he was spouting utter bollocks. He probably thought we were going straight back to the block, from the cinema, for a big sing-song with the staff.

We hadn’t been sat at ease since the Commandant left, so the RSM left without requiring us to stiffen up theatrically. When he’d

gone, CSM Hendricks waited for a few seconds and followed him without another word. The second the doors closed behind him, the braying returned immediately. We were 'encouraged along' and 'gently chided' by the NCOs until we got back outside the cinema. Once again, they optimistically tried to get us to march as a squad, presumably to give them some more abuse ammunition, as if they needed it.

When we made it back in front of the block, we were halted in the quadrangle facing the Squadron offices. At this point, all of the ATNCOs gathered in front of us. This was one of the things I'd never be able to reconcile myself with throughout my time at the College. I'd love to have met the bright spark at the MOD who thought it was a great idea to put 17-year-olds, who'd been in the Army a year, in charge of their younger colleagues. It was a revelation of man-management, straight from the William Golding school of social studies. They loitered around, eyeing us up for an excuse to give us an ear-bashing. But we had already learned to avoid eye contact and to say fuck all, unless something was asked of us.

Then, after a couple of minutes, what looked like a werewolf in a dress and a tramp in uniform came out of the Squadron offices.

The tramp spoke. 'Good afternoon, gents. I am Corporal Timms and I am in charge of the Squadron stores. So when you get your webbing, your lids, and all that, you will get it from me. I will also give you all of the shit that you need to keep the block clean. Is that clear?'

'Yes, Corporal!'

He pointed a shaking hand to the cross-dressing lycanthrope. 'And this lovely lady is Dawn. She is the Squadron Clerk, and will deal with all of your administrative problems. So you will treat her with respect. Is that also clear?'

'Yes, Corporal!'

Timms really was a scruffy bastard. His uniform looked like he had just pulled it off a dead body, and he himself had the appearance of having been on a dirty protest with nothing to keep him company but a year's supply of meths. His ensemble would have been complete if he'd been using a length of electrical flex to

hold up his trousers. My blind respect for anyone with rank had just taken its first knock.

Dawn seemed like a nice enough girl. Although a bit timid, she was of a pleasant disposition. But, fuck me was she hairy. Not the downy ladies' fluff that's noticeable on some women if you catch it from the wrong angle; no, this woman had whiskers you could light a match off. If she'd have been a man, she'd have been charged for not shaving.

Following the introductions by the cast of *Carry On Screaming*, two other permanent staff came out of the office. They were both medium-sized men, again in uniform, but they were carrying pace sticks and wearing a blue sash each that ran diagonally across their chests. They looked like also-rans from a military beauty contest. Both also wore forage caps (more commonly known as 'Twat Hats'), with the peaks running straight down their faces, thus compressing their noses and obscuring their eyes. They had to tilt their heads back and look down their noses at us to speak. The one on the right spoke first, out of the side of his mouth. 'Gentlemen!' he boomed. 'I am Sergeant Atkins. And this,' – he gesticulated to the other sergeant with his stick – 'is Sergeant Bailey. Soon you will be split into different Troops. One of us will be your Troop Sergeant, and from that moment forth, you will fucking hate us. Do I make myself understood?'

'Yes, Sergeant!' we hollered. But amidst our call, a single, whining, unlucky voice could be heard saying, 'Yes, Corporal.'

All the instructors, both permanent staff and junior soldiers, heard it, and in a flash had congregated around a pencil-thin kid who looked a bit like a girl.

'What the fuck did you call me?' screamed Atkins.

'Corporal, Sergeant,' replied the quivering youth.

'*WHY?* Do I *look* like a Corporal?'

'No, Corp... er, Sergeant.'

Atkins stepped forward until he was almost nose to nose with the unfortunate youth.

'What's your fucking name?' he hissed through gritted teeth.

'Rose, Sergeant.' He was close to tears.

'Are you sure it's not Pansy? Do you play any musical instruments, Rose?'

‘Yes, Sergeant. The guitar, Sergeant.’

‘Bollocks, you play the fucking pink piccolo. Or is it the blue veined flute? You’d better sort your fucking shit out and start fucking sparking, Pansy. Or you will end up in a *world* of hurt.’

With that, Atkins, Bailey and all the other non-recruits moved off to the sides, and the final introduction of the squadron hierarchy took place.

Three men walked out. The first, who was also wielding a pace stick, had a badge on the sleeve of his right arm. The other two had their rank atop their shoulders. The first man, with the stick, screamed a word of command. ‘SQUA, SQUAAAAAAAAAAA, CHAAA! Standstill!’

This unintelligible noise was like a sound effect from a karate film, but it made all the other people in uniform spring to attention. Then the smallest of the three men stepped forward, his rank denoted by a crown on his epaulettes. He spoke in 1950s BBC English. ‘Ah, yes, gentlemen. Welcome to Rawson Squadron. You will soon learn that this is the best Squadron in this College, and that to let the standard slip would be a terrible error on your part. I am the Officer commanding the squadron, Major Tatchell.’ (He pronounced it ‘Tetchell’.) ‘This’ – he pointed to the other Officer – ‘is Captain Bessett, my second-in-command.’

Bassett was much older and bigger. He had a badly-broken nose and he looked like he had been in the Army since the Battle of the Bulge.

Finally, Tatchell gestured to the third man who had come out with them, and who had made the strange shouting noises. ‘And this is Sergeant Major Horton. You will get to know him very well in the future, gentlemen. Just make sure that it is for all the right reasons.’

SSM Horton could have been Tatchell’s brother. They were both short, slender men, with hook noses and hooded eyes, and each radiated an air of a wholly unpleasant persuasion. Like a couple of evil Smurfs, or a pair of goat-bothering trolls.

Tatchell looked up and down our group of scruffy youngsters, then he sniffed the air, spun on his heel. ‘Carry on, Sergeant Major!’

‘SAH!’ replied Horton, as he snapped up an immaculate salute. When both officers had gone, he turned to Sergeants Atkins and Bailey and told them to get us processed. Then he, too, returned to his office.

The two sergeants had a conversation with the junior instructors and Dawn, who then went up into the accommodation block.

Then Bailey spoke. ‘Right, gents. When I fall you out, get your lazy arses up into your shaggin’ rooms and get the documentation that you were told to bring. Then be out in the fucking corridor before I arrive, or there will be *hell* to pay!’

He paused, sucked in a lung-full of air then made the same kind of noises that the SSM had made earlier. ‘SQUA, FAAAAAAAAAAAAALLLLLLLLL, ITE!’

As soon as he had given the word, the junior NCOs started shouting and herding us up the stairs, occasionally slipping in an assisting boot up the ring.

We sprinted up the corridor, panting and frantic. The corridor itself was split into three parts, each separated from one another by double doors, and containing three sleeping rooms, one set of toilets, one drying room and one set of showers and sinks. I was in the middle room of the corridor, so I got to my kit quite quickly. Luckily I had stashed my documents at the top of my bag, so I got back out into the corridor well within time. The NCOs had wedged the double doors back, so the corridor was open to its full extent and I could see Dawn at the far end, sitting behind a table laden with files.

When Sergeant Bailey came up the stairs, there were still some lads rummaging frantically through their kit to find their documentation.

Bailey went mad. ‘WHAT DID I SAY? WHAT THE *FUCK* DID I *FUCKING SAY*? BE OUT IN THE *CUNTING* CORRIDOR, WITH YOUR *FUCKING* DOCS, BEFORE I GET UP HERE. AND YOU CAN’T EVEN *FUCKING* GET THAT RIGHT! YOU *FUCKING WANKERS*! THIS IS A VERY *FUCKING* BAD START, GENTLEMEN, VERY BAD *IN-FUCKING-DEED*!’

I felt a wave of collective trepidation sweep through us. Bailey waited until the last man was out in the corridor with his papers.

He then told us all to turn to our right, and the first man at the head of the line then dressed forward with his birth certificate, and Dawn processed him into the Army. After what seemed like an eternity, I was next in line. I gave Dawn my documents, she yawned and scratched her chin. It sounded like a path being swept with a stiff broom. I closed my eyes and shuddered, but all I could visualise was a big pig, rubbing its side up against a tree. I was pulled out of that hideous mental picture when Dawn told me my Army number. 'Don't forget it,' she said.

I returned to my room, repeating it over and over in my head; it helped drive out the last remnants of the swineful visions.