



161st (Green Howards) Reconnaissance Regiment

Formed from the 12th Battalion The Green Howards, the Regiment was originally 161st Regiment R.A.C and was transferred to a reconnaissance role in October 1943.

The 161st never went into action as a regiment, but supplied reinforcements, notably a full squadron to the 43rd Regiment.



Story Courtesy of BBC Peoples war project.

Contributed by Harry Free

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My life would have been very different if there had been no war. Without the war I would have stayed a miner — didn't know anything else. I only joined the war for some excitement.

In 1939 when I was at Hickleton Main Colliery, I decided to join the Navy. I went for two medicals at Sheffield and Manchester. I told them that I was 19 and because mining was a 'reserve occupation' I had to tell them I was a window cleaner. When I told my father that I'd been accepted and I was going he said: 'oh no you're not' and wrote and told them that I was under age and a miner. I didn't really forgive him for that.

I joined the army when I was at South Kirby because I was getting fed up with being a miner but more particularly because I wanted some excitement. I didn't say anything to my father this time. I again said I was 19 and a window cleaner. The recruiting officer said they'd had a lot of window cleaners recently! This time, I didn't say anything to my father till the day I was about to leave. After being accepted, I came off nightshift at 6, went home, had breakfast by 8, and told my father I'd joined the army and had to get to Doncaster that day. He refused to give me the money to get there so I walked it — 7 miles. I thought I'd meet up with some of my mates who'd already joined, but I'd got my regiments mixed up: they'd joined the Sherwood Foresters and I'd joined the Green Howards!

When I arrived at the recruitment centre in Doncaster I signed up and was given the 'King's shilling': I was now a fully paid up member of the Armed Forces. I took the train to Darlington and from there to Richmond. I walked up the steep hill to Richmond barracks and reported to the Guard Room Commander. I was nervous because it was all very new to me. From here the Guard Room Commander took me to the main building and I was handed over to Sergeant Cooke.

Sergeant Cooke was a shocker. He was only short and he had a bayonet scar down one cheek. He certainly put us through our drill and licked us into shape. We were taught how to lay out our kit, polish our boots, make our beds — even fold our socks in exactly the right way — there was only one way to do it and if you didn't you were in trouble. We had palliasses which were straw mattresses and we had to fill them with the straw ourselves. They were quite prickly. We didn't have any sheets or proper pillows, only blankets. I don't remember the blankets ever being washed, nor changing the straw in the palliass. When we had inspection, we had to fold back the palliass and then lay out our kit in exactly the right way. You folded up your blankets and then covered them carefully with another blanket, and then everything else had to be laid out on your bed in exactly the right order.



Picture courtesy of the <http://www.recce.adsl24.co.uk>

Photographers: Unknown

Description: The Regiment's Daimler Armoured Cars under camouflage netting during training exercises in the UK

May June 1943

The Green Howards had leather equipment, not webbing, so this had to be highly polished. We were actually nicknamed 'the patent leather kids'. You'd be inspected by the officer whilst you stood to attention by your bed. Usually there was something wrong, they'd make some sarcastic comment and you'd be up on a charge! You'd be up before the officer, without your cap and be assigned 'fatigues'. This meant 'spud-bashing' (peeling stacks of potatoes), cleaning burnt dixies with sand or some other tedious job.

Church Parade early on Sunday morning was the worst. The RSM would attend this special parade — he was very particular: everything had to be more than perfect.



We did weapon training whilst we were at Richmond — stripping and re-assembling a Bren gun so that you could do it in the dark. We did bayonet practice with straw dummies. We had to shout very loudly whilst we were doing it. I thought it was stupid. We spent a lot of time doing drill, marching up and down to the orders of the corporal. The corporal had to shout very loudly. When I was training to be a corporal I had to train by shouting commands to someone on the other side of the parade ground. You lost your voice after the first day of doing that.

After about six weeks of army life I was feeling fed up so I decided to go home for a break! Arriving at my aunt's home, she enquired why I had returned home so quickly — my reply was "I'm on leave"! After a pleasant weekend in Sheffield, enjoying myself with the local girls I returned to barracks to find myself on a charge. I was before the officer, 'caps off', and receiving seven days 'jankers'. This involved, reporting to the guard house after parades every evening for seven days, performing cookhouse duties. It wasn't worth it and I didn't do it again. However, my friend would go AWOL every weekend to Darlington; he would thumb a lift back and was occasionally picked up by an officer coming back to barracks and would stand before him the following morning to be charged!

After thirteen weeks, a group of us were transferred to Aske Hall, near Richmond for specialist training. I learnt to be a gunner. I was a crack shot at that. If you were part of an armoured car crew you had to be interchangeable so I was also taught wireless operating and how to drive. Driving at night you weren't allowed headlights - they had to be masked apart from a narrow slit. There was less regimentation at Aske Hall because we were divided into groups learning specific tasks.

There were regular cross-country runs. Sometimes I would take enough money to pay for the bus fare so that I would get back before all my mates!

We spent a few months at Aske Hall, then we were transferred as the 12th Battalion Green Howards to Malton, a market town. We were stationed in nissan huts at Malton Racecourse which had been requisitioned by the army during the war. The washing facilities here were poor — consisting of a large square biscuit tin filled with water and heated on the stove. In the morning twenty of us would use it to wash — first up got the clean water. The corporal in charge, Freddie Gee, would stand in it and have a bath — one leg at a time! Alternatively you could go outside and wash under a cold tap. I got up early enough to be the first customer in the biscuit tin. Later on we were transferred from a nissan hut to a tent. The corporal in charge, Sid Sherman, was the PT instructor, and a big mucker of ours; he would let us have a lie-in while he took the rest of the troop to do PT.

Occasionally, when on parade in the morning, one particular officer — a captain - would say "Fall out the card players"! These (including myself) would return to the nissan hut to play brag, whilst the others went on parade. Army life had its ups and downs!

At Malton we went out on exercises and manoeuvres — sometimes for days or weeks - on the Yorkshire Moors. Once it was the middle of winter and some villages had been cut off for days — it must have been 1943. We would have simulated battles with umpires to say if you'd been captured or killed. I always tried to get killed early on so that I could go back to base. When we were back at Malton, evening and weekends were free if you weren't on guard duty or fire picket. We would usually go out to the local pubs and I remember having a girlfriend here who I saw each week.



Picture courtesy of the <http://www.recce.adsl24.co.uk>
Photographers: Unknown
Description: B Troop Training Lt How, Lt Clibbery, Lt Lavery
May June 1943

After this training, my troop was transferred to Sutton Bank to a large house which had been a hotel during peacetime but which had again been requisitioned by the army. We were being trained as specialists, more versatile than the average artillery man. The Colonel in Chief of the Green Howards was King Halkon of Norway.

Eventually, a troop of the Green Howards (about 30 men) was moved to Sutton Bank to learn map reading. We had to learn to find a location using grid references.



By now, it was 1943, and we were sent to Trowbridge in Wiltshire, near to Salisbury plain, home of the white horse. I saw it regularly whilst on manoeuvres here. The whole regiment was now known as the 161 Royal Armoured Corps (RAC) — even those who had not been at Sutton Bank - and no longer a part of the infantry.

(There were 4-5 troops in a Squadron. A regiment was made up of four squadrons)

From Trowbridge, a couple of troops got sent to Tidworth army barracks for two or three weeks. We were given armoured vehicles for practising. We would drive from there to Bovington, an RAC main depot, on to the cliff head above the beach, and fire out to sea with real shells at targets towed by ships. I liked that — I was a good gunner. We learnt wireless operating too. There wasn't much to do at night round here: there was only a Naafi for tea and cakes and we usually spent our free time gambling at cards.

I remember that while I was at Tidworth I was on the top bunk of a pair of bunk beds. My bunk overlooked the ATS's shower rooms and you could see right in. I used to charge my mates 6d to use my top bunk and we spent some happy times ogling the girls in a state of undress without them realising it!

We were then sent to Scarborough where we became the 161 Recce Regiment and had more training. We requisitioned private houses and hotels, turning them into billets from where we would go out on manoeuvres. One such manoeuvre involved a 'fight' between the North and the South of England. We came down south to 'fight' in Dorset, Wiltshire and Somerset. We felt that we were getting rid of the 'soft southerners' and were bound to win. I had my first introduction to rough cider when I was in Somerset. It was 6d (2 ½d) a pint — and we were only allowed a pint! As with most manoeuvres, I wanted to get captured so that I could get sent back to the regimental base!

I was then posted to Ballymena in Northern Ireland — for more manoeuvres. I spent about twelve months here and all that time don't remember any food shortages — you could get anything you wanted in the restaurants. I thought it was ridiculous that when we went on leave from Ireland to England we were never searched as we went through customs, but when we returned from England to Ireland we always got searched.

Whilst I was in Ireland I went out with a girl called Christina. She worked at Gallaghers, the cigarette manufacturer, so I always had a ready source of cigarettes — a good reason for going out with her. She was OK though I split up with her once because she seemed to blow hot and cold. She must have been upset because she actually came up to the Barracks to find me. We started going out again, but for me it was only really because of the cigarettes and the sex and once I left that was the end. (fleeting moments!)

Whilst I was in Ireland I was sent on a motor mechanics course at Fords in Dagenham. I stayed in private billets at Goodmayes and had my meals at Longbridge Road Technical College. I was there for about four months — all the people on the course had been sent from different regiments. Apart from doing homework, evenings and weekends were free and I used to often go to the local skating rink. I was a natural skater without any lessons and a bit of an exhibitionist. It was here that I met Audrey for the first time — she must have been impressed with my skating skills! She was with a friend and my mate and I got chatting to them. I remember asking her if she wanted a drink and when she said yes, I brought her a glass of water. She never let me forget it after we were married. People say it should have been a warning to her! After we'd finished skating, we went to Chadwell Heath by bus which was where her friend lived.



Picture courtesy of the <http://www.recce.ads124.co.uk>

Photographers: Unknown

Description: B Troop Training Cpl Nicholson & Tpr Taylor with Daimler armoured car F117590
May June 1943

Audrey had to get another bus to Romford — I asked my mate to take her home because I didn't want to go all that way! This happened every time we met them after that — my mate took Audrey home and I took her friend. In fact I took her friend to the pictures a couple of times too. Then on the last night before I returned to Ireland, I took Audrey home. I actually had a serious girlfriend in Sheffield who I'd met when I was on leave at my aunt's. Her name was Megan and I used to see her whenever I came home. The next time I came home on leave from Ireland I saw Megan, we had a row and split up. I don't know what the row was about but I got the train straight to Romford and came to see Audrey. When I got to her house I



knocked on the door and by the time she got home from work I was sitting at the table have a meal. I think her parents thought I had the cheek of the devil. I returned to Ireland and on my next leave stayed at a hostel in Romford to be near to Audrey. However, soon after the D-day landing, a tragic incident — the sinking of the Derricunihy with huge loss of life whilst on its way to Normandy - changed my war and probably my life.

I was sent to Aldershot along with other soldiers from different troops from our regiment who were to form the replacement squadron of the **43rd Recce** lost in the incident.

I contacted Audrey who came down to Aldershot for a couple of days before I went to Tilbury to embark. After I arrived at Tilbury, just before sailing I got talking to a docker who lent me his bike and I cycled to Romford to see Audrey for the last time. I could only stay for a couple of hours, but she cycled half way back with me and we parted at the bridge on Rainham Road. I felt very sad to be parting from her as I'd fallen for her more than anyone I'd ever known. The next day we sailed to Sword Beach in Arromanches, France.(For Continuation of this story refer to the 43 Recce file)



Picture courtesy of the <http://www.recce.adsl24.co.uk>
Photographers: Unknown
Description: B Troop Training ,Troop Leaders receiving Orders.
May June 1943