

Larry Hayward's service with 873 (Movement Light) Squadron Royal Engineers (V)

In September 1977 I enlisted with the Army on a three month 'see if you like it' recruit course with the Royal Engineers at Cove in Farnborough, after leaving school but decided not to stay on after the course ended. However I still retained an interest in all things military and when I started work in 1978 I found that it was company policy to allow staff to join the Territorial Army Volunteer Reserve (as the TA was known at that time) and be given extra paid leave while doing so! Luckily my boss at work was happy to let me join as he had done wartime service in the Army, as had many of the senior staff. He probably thought it would do me be good, even though I would be away from work for an extra two weeks each autumn.

In view of my previous enlistment with the Royal Engineers I wanted to join another RE unit so I looked up all their TAVR units in London. The nearest to home was 873 (Movement Light) Squadron Royal Engineers (Volunteers) based at Horn Lane in Acton, West London. I had no idea what the unit's role was and from the sound of it I thought 873 was a 'light transport unit' that transported light weight things! So I went along to see them and much to my amazement I found the unit was equipped with US built AN/TVS-3 30-inch Xenon Searchlights. "What are they for?" I asked during my tour of the Drill Hall. "To provide battlefield illumination or artificial moonlight" replied Corporal Browning who was showing me around. I had never heard of Searchlights being used in this way but as I later discovered, the use of 'artificial moonlight' to assist in night operations had been around for many years and was used to good effect in North Africa, Italy and the Rhine Crossing during WW2 and even later it was proposed for the 1st Gulf War. The Corporal also went on to explain that in addition to increasing light levels for troops working at night, the Xenon Searchlights were also used to enhance the night vision equipment then in use by the British Army. "And we go to Germany nearly every year on exercise" said the Corporal. Well that sounds interesting I thought especially as I heard that other TAVR units mostly went on camp in the UK. And so it was that I signed up as a Sapper in the last operational searchlight unit in the British Army. So I understand all the other units with searchlights never used them like 873, and those that remained in service were just for show!

In the 1970's the yearly TAVR Bounty was about £100 per year and made up of about £52 for something and another for £48 for something else. However immediately after the 1979 election, the TAVR became the Territorial Army and gained in importance in the Government. The Bounty for passing a Battle Fitness Test, first aid, gunnery and trade tests was still £100 per year but it now increasing by another £100 for every year served but capped initially at £300. At the time I joined £100 was about three weeks' pay. But much to my delight I instantly qualified for £200 Bounty after my first year as the three month RE recruit training I had done in 1977 meant the number of days service in 1977 exceeded the minimum required for a 'TA year'. Also I didn't have to do another recruit course! Eventually after a few years the yearly Bounty rose to £500 per year, which was paid in March or April together with my work bonus and salary all of a similar amount, so I felt very rich! For the BFT we had to run 3 miles in less than 23 ½ minutes in combat trousers and army boots. Older men were given a few more minutes. Initially the BFT was done as a Squad around the streets of North Acton, with a half way 'pause' built in to it (I think to simulate how it would be on operations) but in later years the BFT was run in one go, which I much preferred. Passing the BFT was essential in order to get the Bounty, so I used to do it in about 22 ½ minutes, which is just over 7 minutes a mile!

Nowadays it is done in shorts and trainers, as believe it or not running in Army boots has been deemed a bit risky with soldiers breaking their naviculars (a bone in the foot)!

873 Movement Light Sqn was originally formed as 873 Searchlight Battery RA in 1947 before being transferred to the Royal Engineers in 1961 and in 1977 was still using the same *pre-war* 90 inch Carbon Arc Searchlights, as used in the London Blitz, with which the unit had been equipped when it was originally formed! The old Carbon Arc Searchlights were mostly dated from 1938 and each was mounted on the back of a Bedford RL 3 ton lorry towing a pre-war 15 KVA Lister Generator trailer. As you can imagine these 'Searchlight 'portee and trailer' combinations were very unwieldy and difficult to manoeuvre in to position at night. So during 1977 the unit re-equipped with new AN/TVS-3 30-inch Xenon Searchlights imported from the USA. The Xenons were rated at 800 Million Candle Power; about one and a half times the power of the Carbon Arcs which were rated at about 550 Million Candle Power. After the Xenons arrived, the old Searchlights were retained by '873' for ceremonial duties including lighting up events at Wembley Stadium, Horse Guards Parade and Buckingham Palace and Royal Weddings but that as they say is another story.

The AN/TVS-3 was designed in the 1960's and had been used by the US Army in Vietnam in a more direct manner to illuminate the perimeter of US static bases at night whenever the Vietcong had a habit of attacking after popping up out of their underground tunnels. The Yanks even fitted machine guns to some so as to shoot down the beam! In addition to visible light, the Xenons also had an infra-red capability, though this was seldom used by us. Initially when the MOD ordered the Xenons, it considered ordering the same vehicles that were used to tow these Searchlights in the US Army, which I think was the M715 Kaiser Jeep but luckily nothing came of it. The M715 was not a Jeep as such but was a typical wide bodied American pickup truck of the era and was adapted for military use. However its size may have been its downfall as I doubt it could fit well in RAF transport aircraft, plus it was 'left hand' drive and with so few in use, spares would have been expensive.

Instead the MOD opted for $\frac{3}{4}$ ton Land Rovers fitted with a Newton Derby F.7580 25 KVA alternator, driven by a power take-off, from the transfer box. The official designation for these Land Rovers was 'Generating Set, Truck Mounted, 25KVA, 208/110V, 400Hz, 3 Phase, AC. In addition to powering Searchlights the vehicles could also provide power for demolition hammers and rock drills. All these Land Rovers were Series 3 and right hand drive and were mostly registered in the GF range ie, 63GF17, 63GF26 or 63GF74. All of them had a canvas roof. The registrations confirm they were built circa 1975-76 but so far I have not found out who converted these Land Rovers from standard General Service vehicles. 873 (Movement Light) Squadron RE had about eight Land Rover and Xenon Searchlight combinations, split into A and B Troop, each with four lights. In addition 873 had at least two 'Fitted for Radio' (FFR) Land Rovers per troop; one acted as a kind of Forward Observation Post and the other was for the Troop Commander in charge of one Troop of Searchlights. The Squadron HQ also had a two or three 'hard top' FFR Land Rovers for the OC, 2 i/c and Squadron Sergeant Major and a few GS Land Rovers and Bedford RL trucks for REME and the Cooks who usually stayed behind the lines at our harbour area.

Depending on the amount of artificial moonlight required each Xenon Searchlight could be deployed either in line abreast about 300 metres or more apart to give a broad coverage, perhaps for the movement of Tanks and Armoured Personnel Carriers or in one's and two's to help the Engineers build a bridge or the RAOC move stores. Unlike the AA or Coastal

Searchlights of WW2 which provided direct illumination of targets, our Xenons were used indirectly to raise the level of ambient light in forward areas from up to three or more miles behind the 'front line', so we hardly ever saw the troops we were helping.

However on one occasion, I remember going up to the forward area to see a Royal Artillery unit dug in on a German hill side to see how the light from our Searchlights improved their L4A1 image intensifier which looked like a very fat wide angled lens fitted to a paparazzi's camera on a tripod. I think that's why the L4A1 image intensifier was called 'Twiggy' in the same way that anyone who was short was called lofty! I was surprised when looking through 'Twiggy' how much clearer things were with a bit of extra moonlight from our lights. To get the best results from our lights, great care was taken in setting the elevation and bearing of the beam (in mils) according to the terrain and the weather conditions. On dark moonless nights the best results occurred when there was cloud cover at around 1,000 feet as the beam of light could be reflected off it. Incidentally, I was told our 'artificial moon light' would have the opposite effect on enemy night vision equipment as the enemy image intensifiers would be 'blinded' when looking *towards* our beam of light. It sounds logical though I never saw it put it to the test.

The Xenon Searchlights could also light up areas without any activity as a decoy and we certainly felt that in a shooting war we would have been very much a decoy ourselves or rather a complete sitting duck to any attack helicopter or missile! The power cable from the Land Rover to the Searchlight was just 30 metres long, compared to 300 yards for the old Carbon Arcs so we could not hide the Land Rover far enough away from the Searchlight. As the Control Box was attached to the side of the Xenon Searchlight by a 1 metre long cable, controlling it remotely from a slit trench was also out of the question! There was always a lot of debate as to how we would operate, defend ourselves, and make our exit if the Searchlight had to be abandoned in a real war. I suggested that the Searchlights should have been mounted on the back of a Laird Centaur (a Land Rover halftrack built in 1977) with the facility to either use the lights on the vehicle or dismount them and a generator for remote use, and perhaps throw in a couple of Centaurs mounting quad 0.5 inch Browning Machine Guns for good measure! Sadly there wasn't a hope the Army would have agreed, just like my suggestion that the Troop Commanders should have a Daimler Ferret armoured car each! Certainly driving a Centaur or Ferret would have added to our 'grin factor' but the MOD wasn't having it so for the time being we would have to 'contend' with our trusty Land Rovers!

Each Land Rover and Xenon combination had a three man crew of Commander, Driver and Searchlight Operator / Signaller. Our usual mode of operation was for the Searchlight crews to 'lie up' in a harbour area in woods during most of the day and get prepared in the afternoon. During the day the Troop Commanders and NCOs in Land Rover FFRs would be out liaising with other NATO units and surveying the area in which we were to operate. Late in the afternoon an 'O' Group would be held. At dusk each Troop would move out of the harbour area, then drive to the designated area and then be guided into position just after dark. As the Xenon shone in the direction it was towed (over the towing arm) we drove in to position, then two crew members unhitched the searchlight and lifted the heavy cable drum out of the Land Rover and attached it to the side of the Searchlight's chassis. The driver meanwhile did a U turn and positioned the Land Rover 30 metres behind. We would then unwind the cable and drag one end back to the Land Rover to attach to the socket on the back of the vehicle. Once the cable drum was empty the end was then attached to the Xenon, low down below the

Searchlight. The power take off which ran the Generator was selected by the driver by pulling out the 'Power Take Off' lever in the drivers side 'heel board' of the Land Rover, then selecting fourth gear. The required engine revs were set with a hand throttle mounted in the cab above the transmission tunnel and these were regulated by a Leyland 606883 engine speed governor under the bonnet.

We always wanted to be set up before each other and on occasions a crew member in the Land Rover might assume that the 30 metre cable had been attached to the Searchlight and would turn the power on prematurely while the other man was screwing the cable in to the underside of the Xenon, after which a few sparks and 'choice words' would fly, though strangely never any fists! It always amazed me how 'relaxed' men were about nearly being electrocuted by their 'mates'! After setting up the Searchlight with everything at the ready, orders would come through on the radios each vehicle carried. Initially our radio link was via a very old A41 Manpack Larkspur Radio that had a tuning knob like a domestic radio which had to be re-tuned often and gave a constant hiss in my ears; so much so that I had to wear only one ear piece which I swapped constantly from ear to ear to stop going deaf! Later we used the brand new Clansman PRC 351 radio which had the frequency set by numbered dial settings, so if you needed frequency 123, you turned the first dial to 1 the second to 2 and third to 3 and there it stayed tuned and ready until it was reset. It was crystal clear to use and there was no hissing in the ears. When I first joined the unit the order to shine the searchlight was given in clear over the radio as 'expose' (much to our amusement) and to turn it off it was 'douse'. However from about 1980 it was soon apparent that such a unique order could easily identify the one and only Searchlight unit in the British Army, so the orders were changed to 'fire' and 'cease fire'. Often the task would involve each Searchlight being in place at the same location from dusk till just before dawn and the Land Rover Generator could be run quite happily all night long. The manual states that the Generator could actually run for 14 hours at 50% of maximum continuous rated output from the fuel carried. Understandably, by the early hours of an all-night task, the fuel ran low so we would receive a replenishment of a few Jerry cans of petrol and some food or hot drink if we were lucky, and would think nothing of pouring fuel into the under seat tanks, with the Generator still screaming away, oblivious to any danger from sparks or the red hot exhaust pipe just to one side of the tank!

The worst part of the drill was packing up and reeling in the 30 metre long, two inch wide cable, especially when dressed in full NBC kit and webbing and carrying a 7.62 mm SLR rifle in the pouring rain, up to your ankles in mud! As with setting up, we would be racing to see who could pack up the fastest and sometimes this resulted in novice crews driving off with the Land Rover earth spike still in the ground or failing to raise the support leg after hitching up the Xenon, resulting in it getting broken off. Strangely the only place to store the cable reel was to lay it flat in the back of the Land Rover. It was incredibly heavy at around 150 lbs and was a danger to the person in the back. The cable reel had a large 'V' shaped bracket on it (in order to fix the cable reel to the Searchlight when the cable was being wound in and out) and this bracket nearly impaled a Sapper when his Land Rover lurched over to the right hand side down a small ditch. Not long after I joined, I bought a large chain and padlock, and secured the cable in a vertical position to the Generator control panel, to give me a sporting chance if the vehicle tipped over and it had the added bonus of giving me a bit of leg room. After packing up we usually met by an NCO who would guide our vehicle back on to a public road where we met up with the other crews and proceeded back to a pre-arranged harbour area, which for much of the time in Germany was a large wood or a German Farm. We became quite expert at moving into a wooded harbour area at night guided by the red glow of an

NCO's torch and the convoy light of the vehicle in front. Once in position we 'cammo-ed up' with black hessian, camo nets and poles. All this we did as silently as possible without the revving of engines, slamming of doors or shouts of "over here mate" (unlike a Field Squadron to which I later transferred!). Once the camo was done we might get an hour's kip before the dawn 'stand to' (this was standard drill where we had to take up pre-arranged firing positions in case of a dawn attack) and apart from guard duty we would then go back to sleep till late morning.

However depending on our location we could sometimes be disturbed by inquisitive German civilians out walking their dog or other 'distractions' like the time I was woken by a procession of blond teenage girls in PE kit, out for a mid-morning cross country run with their Games Mistress! On another occasion we set up trip wires with flares attached to the end so that if the opposing 'orange forces' attacked by sneaking up in the night we could see them. But no night attack came and the trip wires were still in place when the civilians came wandering through the woods and I remember the alarm on their faces when I shouted in my best pigeon Deutsch '*Achtung minen, nicht betreten!*' I couldn't find the words for trip flare in my military dictionary, but saying 'mines' did the trick.

Because of the way we operated on exercise in Germany, the cooks often cooked a proper meal for us only once a day or so it seemed! So sometimes after getting up in the late morning we would eat as much as we could all in one go at mid-day! We were always hungry, so we ate everything on offer and then went back for more! I remember on one occasion having more than half a dozen eggs in one go and the same number of rashers of bacon, and sausages and bread and butter and mugs of tea, without feeling bloated! There were some men who used to delight in having their main course and dessert chucked in together in one mess tin as they said it saved them the walk back to the cooking area (especially as the military drill says everyone must disperse back to their vehicles with food to save becoming a easy target for enemy gunners).

Apart from the 'accidental' damage we did to the Searchlights, when packing up in a hurry, serviceability was a problem, in that (if my memory serves me correctly) the glycol used in the Searchlight's cooling system sometimes crystallized or left some kind of residue in the pump; this restricting the flow of coolant, causing temperatures to rise and at a certain point the Searchlight was turned off by an auto cut-out switch! As one wag said to me '873' got its Squadron number from the fact that eight Land Rovers and Searchlights set out, only seven arrived (someone always got lost) and when set up only three Searchlights would work, which was not far from the truth sometimes!

Unlike a normal GS Land Rover, more than half of the rear body was taken up with the Generator, so we had to think carefully about stowage of kit as we needed to keep the Generator clear of clutter to stop it over heating. However the lack of storage was soon solved when someone 'acquired' some galvanised wire shelves that looked as if they were taken from a factory bakery oven but how we got them no one asked! The shelves were tied half way up the tilt hoops above the Generator and netting was tied to the front to stop things falling on to the front seats. In this way we provided storage for every bit of kit for three men and this modification soon became 'standard' in all the 'Generating Set, Truck Mounted vehicles. The camo nets, poles and hessian was carried on the top of the tilt, with other bits of hessian tied along the sides to hide the rear wheels when the vehicle was being camouflaged. On one occasion someone obtained some farmers orange nylon rope, to hold everything in

place, which looked most un-military! Later someone got a tractor tyre inner tube and cut it into thin strips which we used to stretch from the tilt hooks on one side of the vehicle over the roof to the other side, quite literally like large black rubber bands. We found these were faster to do up and un-do than if we used rope.

Strangely for the first few years of service with 873, the Xenon Searchlights we had were not modified in any way to meet British Army requirements or UK Road Traffic regulations; they had no mudguards, no traffic indicators or proper brakes, no proper brake lights or even any army registrations! The Searchlights had small half-moon shaped red rear lights but that's all. The wheels and tyres were a different size to those on our Land Rovers, so who knows what we would have done if we had a puncture, as no one carried a spare! In 1980 the Searchlights received registration numbers which were written on a civi style yellow 'number plates' and screwed to the rear of the Searchlights. As we were going to Germany again that year, another sign with the words '*Achtung Keiner Blinken*' was attached to the Searchlight to warn German road users of the lack of indicators. Worse still was the fact that the towing arm was short and the Searchlight had a high centre of gravity. To prepare the Searchlight for towing, the light had to be stowed with the glass lens pointing upwards but if the light was not locked in position first with stay arms, then when the unfortunate crew members lifted the towing arm up, to hook it on to the Land Rover, the light swung round of its own accord and with all the weight to the rear, the Xenon flipped on it back with a crash leaving the towing arm pointing skywards! Not surprisingly the Searchlight usually didn't work after such treatment! Incidentally the Searchlights were still painted US Army Olive Drab for several years after we got them which looked odd behind our gloss British Army Bronze Green Land Rovers.

Sometime during 1982 a new Regular NCO arrived at the unit as our Permanent Staff Instructor, and was truly horrified at the basic condition of our Xenons. Therefore the whole lot went off to Workshops to be fitted with redesigned 'Y' shaped chassis and equipped with all the usual bits a trailer should have including lights, indicators, brakes, registration plate and Land Rover wheels and tyres. We even had hard plastic mudguards fitted and with a longer chassis and revised stowing position the Searchlight was much more stable for lifting on to the NATO towing hitch. It is strange to think that when we towed the unmodified Xenons no one ever picked us up on the missing bits and yet once the registrations, lights and mudguards were fitted I remember a member of the public in a car pulling up next to me in the Pentonville Road and saying that he was going to report me to the Police as the registration on my Xenon was different from the towing vehicle! No amount of telling him that Army trailers have a separate registration would convince him! I should have said I had no insurance, MOT or Tax disk but the traffic moved on. The official British Army designation for our searchlights was '30 inch Xenon Lamp Searchlight' but even with the modifications it did not change. As our Land Rovers had previously been painted NATO matt green and black the year before, when we got the modified Xenons back from Workshops, they too had been repainted the same so we finally had vehicles and searchlights in matching colours.

Officially 873 Movement Light Sqn RE was part of 73 Engineer Regiment RE (V) but we did not see too much of the other units apart from occasions when we had yearly inter-unit Field Engineer Squadron competitions. These competitions, between 873 Movement Light

Squadron, 217 (London) Field Squadron at Holloway, 129 (East Riding) at Hull and Goole, and 575 (Sherwood Foresters) Field Squadron at Chesterfield and Derby, were often held in the midlands at a military training area and involved being tested on various subjects such as NBC drills, defences, mine warfare, personal weapons, radio signalling and obstacle courses. We were also tested on fitness and I remember a run over perhaps 10 miles where the team had to carry half a telegraph pole and to keep to the time given for the task we each supported each other to ensure no one dropped out. As we neared the finish line I remember charging ahead carrying about seven SLR Rifles on my back to lighten the load for others carrying the pole, only to be turned back by an NCO as we all had to cross the line at the same time, but luckily our squad was just a few paces behind!

Our fitness was I think, better than the other units on this occasion as we came first. This was because we had a trained PTI in our unit named Richard or Richie (originally from Ghana) and we often did fitness training on weekday evenings. We also did well on the trade tests, despite being a Searchlight unit so we were placed quite high when the results were declared. It was on such an occasion that I arrived at the TA centre on Friday night straight from work and then realised that I had no civi clothes to wear on the Saturday night when we were allowed time out to go to the pub during the inter-unit Field Engineer Squadron competition (I think it was in Yorkshire) and so I was the only one dressed in a suit and tie that night, in the back of the Bedford MK 4 ton truck and it was forbidden to mix TA kit and civi clothes!

The HQ for 73 Engineer Regiment always seemed remote as it was in Bilborough in Nottingham, which was somewhere up north as far as us 'Londoners' were concerned! As for us 'Londoners' I actually mean a strange mix of nationalities! We had such a large proportion of 'second generation' men of Polish origin, that on a visit to Arundel Castle it just so happened that the Poles were all at the front, so when the first eight or so had given their names, the official taking details exclaimed "Good God, this is a unit of the *British Army* isn't it?" Actually in the early 1980's apart from those of Polish origin we had quite a few men of Caribbean or West African origin, which certainly got me into a few 'interesting' night clubs in Nottingham, when on training weekends at 73 Regiment RE HQ! As for our professions these were very varied and included mechanics, window cleaners, bank clerks, factory workers, a barmen and a few who worked for the BBC. Despite all this we really 'gelled' as a unit and got on well and we would have done anything for our comrades if needed.

Most of the time it seemed that 873 acted like an Independent Sqn RE and nearly every year supported BAOR for their autumn exercises. My first BAOR exercise was in October 1979 and for that we went by DFDS Ferry. After disembarkation some of the men were flown in to position in the field by US Army Boeing CH-47C Chinook helicopters of the 205th Aviation Company 'The Geronimos', with the vehicles under slung, but I was in the road party as sadly I did not get involved. On this camp in 1979 we also had two reporters from the Acton Gazette with us and they took photos and wrote a piece about us in the paper which I still have as there are a few photos of me in the newspaper. Most of the time our Squadron seemed to be on its own as I cannot remember being involved with many BAOR units. However I think it was on this camp that we were 'attacked' by a Squadron of Scorpion Tanks that charged towards us through a farmer's field and I remember seeing cabbages flying off in all directions as they were ripped up by the tank tracks. I also remember that we camped out in a military training area near a destroyed brick bunker and when I looked at one of the bricks it was dated 1938. It was here that we slept in the open air in our sleeping bags a few nights and I remember that at night the temperature was so low that a thick frost formed on my sleeping

bag! Someone said it was -7 Centigrade that night. Still it wasn't the coldest I ever experienced in the TA.

The biggest exercise for many years was *Operation Crusader 80 / Operation Spearpoint* in September / October 1980 which involved the mobilisation of over 100,000 men from many NATO countries. As this was an important exercise a *Times* newspaper reporter named Blake) arrived at the TA centre to interview us. However he was not what I had expected from such a high profile newspaper as he had yellow teeth, and constantly smoked and drank whisky from a hip flask!

As for Crusader 80 it was memorable but for all the wrong reasons! It started when we all arrived at the TA Centre in Acton on Friday evening after work on 12th September 1980 and loaded up all the kit we needed before setting off in the middle of the night for Colchester Barracks. Driving in a convoy at 30 mph, it took more than two hours to get there. I was in the back of the Land Rover 63GF74 which towed a searchlight and L/Cpl Steve Burke was in the front as vehicle i/c and L/Cpl Alan Ball our driver, had been borrowed from another unit within 73 Regiment. I did not drive at that time so Steve and Alan shared the driving. The journey was tiring as the heavy vehicles slowed when going up hills but sped up when going down. So it was 'stop and start' all the way. When we got to Colchester well before dawn I remember 'occupying' the upper part of a Victorian Cavalry barrack block above old stables, now used for storage. However, I do not remember sleeping in Colchester so I think we were just hanging around waiting to be called forward by the MTO to move out to Harwich Docks. So there was no sleep for any of us on Friday night which tired out many of the drivers and this had consequences later on. Eventually after a lot of 'hurry up and wait' we got to the docks where we were loaded on to a DFDS ferry called 'Dana Anglia'. We all then went up on deck to waive good bye to 'blighty' for two weeks. It was at this time that one of the Dockers pulling in the ropes on the quay side shouted out to us "Oy you lot should be going to Iraq". How prophetic! Actually he was referring to fighting between Iran and Iraq war which had just started with Iraqi border raids on Iran, and soon to be a full blown Iran-Iraq war.

The ship then set sail on Saturday lunchtime for Zeebrugge, and the voyage took around 7 hours. By the time we had arrived and every bit of kit, vehicle and trailer had been unloaded it was not far off getting dark. We were then formed up in to a massive convoy by the Military Police (possibly with units from other ships) and set off once more heading for NW Germany, mostly on Motorways and 'A' class roads. However being a major NATO exercise (perhaps the biggest) the convoys were directed every now and then to refuelling areas, which consisted of piles of jerry cans stacked up beside the road. We had to get out and pick up what we needed, refuel and leave the empties in another pile but in doing so L/Cpl Alan Ball was hit by a Dutch police BMW motorbike when he crossed the road in the dark, which tossed him in to a hedge. Luckily he only suffered cuts and bruises and was told to take a rest. I actually saw this incident from the other side of the road and what amazed me even more was that the Dutch Policeman just looked, shrugged his shoulders then drove off without stopping! But worse was to come! With Alan resting, L/Cpl Steve Burke did more of his fair share of the driving. However he eventually became so tired from his long hours at the wheel that we later put him in the back of the Land Rover to sleep. I jumped in the cab to be with L/Cpl Alan Ball who despite his grazed and bruised leg was able to drive and we set off in convoy for Germany. However when our convoy arrived in Germany at dawn on 14th Steve

was not in the back of the Land Rover where we had left him! No doubt in a state of complete exhaustion Steve had fallen out of the back of the Land Rover on the motorway somewhere between Holland and Germany. We did not see or hear him go, so we had no idea when it happened during the night and with our kit was piled so high that it was impossible to see anything in the back. We just knew he had to be dead as there was no way he could have avoided being hit by the underside of the searchlight or its wheels or a vehicle behind us. His parka was draped over the trail arm of the searchlight and was soaking wet from the spray, so I knew it wasn't a practical joke. I rushed along to the vehicles to the rear of the convoy desperately asking if anyone had seen anything but no one had, apart from someone who thought he had seen what looked like a rolled up camouflage net on the motorway at night. It was the worst moment for me in the TA! But then after what seemed ages someone came to find us to say Steve was alive! They had seen him fall and had stopped to assist. An ambulance had taken Steve to a Dutch Military Hospital, where amazingly he was treated for just cuts and bruises and had no broken bones! However he was kept in under observation as he had banged his head and that's where he stayed for a few days before being transferred to RAF Hospital Wegberg for most of his two week camp. I think Steve was pleased to be in a British run hospital as he didn't like the way, or rather where, the Dutch nurses used to stick the thermometer to take his temperature! How did he avoid certain death you might wonder? Well Steve had no memory of the accident at all but the driver of the Land Rover behind us, who pulled over to help, told us that while the convoy was on the move, he saw Steve climb over the rear tailgate and then on to the rear bumper and then start climbing along the *side* of the Land Rover, and when he put his foot on the rear wheel he was thrown off! And why should he do such a thing? Well after 48 hours with very little sleep anything is possible but as his hobby was rock climbing we can only assume that's what he was doing in his sleep! It was a miraculous escape by any means and he could so easily have been one more casualty to add to the list of 64 other soldiers who lost their lives on that exercise (mostly in vehicle related accidents). Luckily he chose the driver's side for his climbing which on the continent is the opposite side from the fast lane, and as we were in the slow lane he went on to the motorway hard shoulder. It was certainly a relief to hear the news but with two of my three man team injured on the journey I began to worry about my own chances!

Eventually after spending most of Sunday 'on the road' the convoy arrived at a very basic tented RE bridging camp on the outskirts of Hamelin, where we sorted out our kit and tested our searchlights for a few days before joining in with the NATO exercise 'in the field' as part of 'Blue Force'. On the first night's operation I seem to remember having a scratch crew with me in the Land Rover to help operate the searchlight as Steve was still in hospital. Sometimes when shining our Xenons we would be in a static position for hours and if there was little radio traffic and not much to do we would take it in turns to sit in the Land Rover to get warm. So on this occasion, I sat down in the cab for a few minutes when suddenly the bearings in the generator seized up and it started belching out thick black smoke which smelt like burnt rubber. Luckily I was able to turn off the ignition and disengage the Power Take Off before the generator started to burn. I began to think that 63GF74 was out to get us and with two of the crew injured perhaps it was my turn! It's a good job I wasn't sound asleep in the Land Rover when it happened as it could have easily burnt if the PTO carried on turning a seized generator! Consequently, as our Generator wasn't working the three-man scratch crew was disbanded and our working searchlight was swapped with another that was not, so for the time being 63GF74 was left at the harbour area and was only driven whenever the unit moved to a new location. I was then 'lent' to the Squadron Sergeant Major (WO1 Hetherington) and

acted as his map reader / navigator, as he knew I could map read very well on the move, especially as we operated in wooded and hilly areas and on minor roads all over Northern Germany. Little did I realise at the time that this arrangement would lead to a situation where I inadvertently impersonated an Officer when visiting a Royal Signals unit. On that particular day, the SSM said to me jump in the Land Rover, as we are going to borrow some more modern Clansman 351 radios from the Army, as our old Larkspur A41 Radios weren't good in contacting other NATO units.

I remember the journey well as we were in a bit of a rush and the SSM appreciated me reading the road and telling him features to look for in advance and when to turn; a bit like a rally driver's mate. The Royal Signals unit we had to visit was a re-broadcast unit based on the top of a very steep hill and I remember the track was very steep and about a 1:4 gradient.

They say that there are three things that contribute to any incident or accident or in my case being mistaken for an Officer on this occasion. To start with in the Army, Officers never drive and have their own driver, and this is often the case with a Squadron Sergeant Major who would also have a driver. I did not have a driving licence at this time so you can understand that it was a little odd that I was being driven by a person of higher rank. The second coincidence to help with the confusion was the fact that the SSM Hetherington, as a WO, could have been called 'Sir' by me and any other lower rank but it just so happen that he used to say to the men in 873 that he disliked being called 'Sir' as he was 'one of the men' too. I therefore called him 'Sar' Major' in the same way that an Officer would address him. Added to that we were all in our Nuclear Biological & Chemical (NBC) suits so our rank badges were hidden.

We got to the top of the hill and I got out of the passenger side and said something along the lines of 'wow what a magnificent view' in an accent that wasn't from 'up north' or too Cockney, which was rare in the British Army (except of course for Officers). On hearing this a Regular Army Sergeant said "Good afternoon Sir" and gave me a salute, which I instantly returned (rather than explain I was a mere Sapper) so as not to embarrass him in front of his men. The Sergeant said I understand that you need to borrow some radios Sir and I said "yes that's right". He then asked me to explain the A & B Troop radio net which I drew for him on some paper and all the time he was talking it was "thank you Sir" or "right Sir". Then his men came over with the eight Clansman Radios we needed and helped load them in to our Land Rover. As a 'parting shot' the Sergeant said to me "Oh and by the way Sir you will need this" and handed me a bound A4 size file with 'Top Secret' on it and a red 'X' from corner to corner on the cover! Striking something of a casual pose by this time, I said thanks and had a flick through to see what was so secret! In fact it was a list of the 'three letter call signs' for all the NATO units on the exercise and just the kind of thing the Russians would have dearly loved to have, to help them identify each unit in their recordings of our transmissions made by their own listening posts in East Germany! I then made my escape and headed down to our Land Rover. Strangely the SSM had kept out of the discussions that I had with the Regular Army Sergeant and had been busy with securing the tilt on the Land Rover which should have been my job! By now the engine was running and we were ready to go but when the SSM saw me with the top secret file he shouted at me "*fucking give that here*" and snatched it from me and we both got in the Land Rover and drove off! To this day I have often wondered what those Regulars must have thought of the SSM and why he was so rude to me, as his 'superior Officer'! I said no more about it to anyone until now!

For the next seven days of the Operation Crusader 80 exercise I continued to act as the SSM Hetherington's navigator and helping out wherever needed at Sqn HQ. During the exercise I remember being in a Land Rover (probably to map read) when we were taking one of the Cooks to a Field Hospital. From memory his name was Corporal Cocks and he was suffering from Kidney pains. These were caused from working in the heat with the petrol burners that were used to do the cooking and without much to drink to keep hydrated he became unwell. The trouble was that the Field Hospital we were trying to find kept moving and despite seeing 'Tac' signs for it we could not locate it. We even asked an RMP for directions but by the time we drove in to the forest where the RAMC were supposed to be we found nothing. In fact I think we gave up looking and in the end resorted to resting the poor man and giving him as much fluid as possible, which was the best we could do as we had no medics or MO in 873!

Another incident that springs to mind on this exercise was being asked to guard a track that led up from the main road to where one of our searchlights was operating in a German farmer's field. My brief was to stop anyone interfering or spying on what we were doing since even in West Germany the Russians had paid snoopers to gather intelligence. In addition the Russians also had the right to send a Soviet Military Mission (called Soxmis for short) to inspect West German troop formations, while at the same time the British Army had Britmis in East Germany in order to observe East German troops (as did other NATO countries).

However the Russians used to spy on the British Army even though this was in breach of the agreement and if caught could be 'arrested' until the Royal Military Police arrived to escort them from the area. The trouble was that the Russians drove in civilian cars and so I was told had a uniform that consisted of trousers and a leather jacket to which they attached very small military insignia, so not to be so obvious. Their cars had a special yellow registration so we were told to keep a good look out for Soxmis. So in the darkness I took up a position with my SLR rifle in a bush to keep watch over the track. Then well after midnight I saw a vehicle come along the main road and slow down and then turn up the dusty track. I could tell from the lights it was not one of ours; it was a civilian car. As the car came near I got ready to stop it and at the last moment ran out of the bush with my rifle which greatly alarmed the occupants (and me) as it turned out to be a German Police Car containing two armed Policemen! As it transpired they were not spies but just some very bored local Policemen, who had seen plenty of British Army units before but had never seen anything like our searchlight. Perhaps they thought the blinding light in the field was a UFO! We were kind enough to show them the searchlight and explain a little about it in pigeon German before they went on their way.

As Margaret Thatcher had been Prime Minister for about 18 months in autumn 1980 she wanted to visit the British Army during Operation Crusader 80 and during the exercise I heard a story that may be true but which I have yet to corroborate. It is said that Mrs Thatcher was invited by the 'top brass' to a hillside in order to see Chieftain tanks and other armoured vehicles of a British Armoured Brigade advance down a wide German valley. At the bottom of the valley was a small village and so the story goes a property in the village caught fire in an unrelated incident just as the advance got underway. As there were so many armoured vehicles moving on the roads and through the fields in the area, the local fire brigade were either unable to reach the fire or thought it was too dangerous to try, so they stayed away.

Consequently an adjoining property or properties caught fire too and smoke began to rise over the village. With the dust and the black diesel fumes from the vehicles, and now the smoke from the fires, Mrs Thatcher is said to have commented how realistic the action was, totally unaware that not all of what she saw was meant to happen!

During our time on Operation Crusader 80 we did get some time off and I remember going out for a drink and a meal in Hamelin with a few other men. I remember that Hamelin was swarming with troops including Yanks from 101st Airborne Division who got up to their usual tricks of drinking out of helmets and more worryingly throwing 'thunder flash' training grenades at each other in the street. I think we made our excuses and left for another bar before the MPs turned up! Unlike the UK, German bars are open until the last client leaves so that was usually well after 3 pm and I remember being in a place where the resident drunk old man kept on coming up to us a grinning and saying "Prost" and "Brigade International" over and over again. However some other regular customers said just ignore him he's crazy as he served on U-boats during the war and had been depth charged a few times too many.

Towards the end of the second week of the exercise I was told by the SSM Hetherington we would be going to RAF Hospital Wegberg to get Steve back, and return him to where 873 was on exercise (South of Hamburg) so that he would be ready for the unit's return to the UK at the weekend. You may think we could have arranged to pick him up on the way home but I don't think RAF Hospital Wegberg would have appreciated a complete convoy dropping by and in any case it's not the 'done thing' for single vehicles to drop out of convoys to run errands!

The day we went to get Steve from hospital I had been up all night having a bit of R&R in Hamburg and was hoping to get some sleep. Instead the SSM said I was to map read for him and be his look out as the Land Rover was right hand drive. As was typical we left in the early evening and had till dawn to get there and back! RAF Wegberg is on the Dutch German border and so it was a 400 mile round trip! Eventually we reached RAF Wegberg. As it was dark I did not see much of the buildings but I do remember seeing lots of single storey huts and the entrance hall which had a large winged rod and serpent in a circle set in to the marble floor. By the time we got Steve it was about 10 pm and we still had the return journey ahead of us. Luckily most of the journey was on Autobahns so we could drive at about 65 mph but it was still more than 3 hours 'on the road' back to NW Germany. By this time I remember being so tired that I started feeling strange and at one point said to the SSM "OK It's all clear now you can over take" to which he said "Overtake what?" as there was nothing in front of us on an almost deserted motorway in the middle of the night! Fatigue began to play tricks on me and I also remember gasping, as a patch of fresh tarmac cut in to the road looked like it was a person who we were going to run over! Lucky the SSM wasn't as tired as me!

Once we got back to our unit, and with L/Cpl Steve Burke now classed as fit, he rejoined me and L/Cpl Alan Ball in our 'trusty stead' Land Rover 63GF74 for our move to Sennelager, where UK based units were being assembled to form convoys for return to the UK via Belgian ports. After a meal at Sennelager in a tented transit area, the vehicles were formed up in a large convoy and we eventually moved off out of the base on our tiresome journey back to Zeebrugge, which would be done in stages between rest and refuelling areas (in view of the slowness of some of the large vehicles that only did 40 mph). However, we must have travelled about half a mile or less up the road in '63GF74' when we heard a loud 'twang' from

under the bonnet. We instantly pulled over to the side of the road and watched as the convoy carried on in to the distance. In such circumstances the orders were clear; the convoy had to carry on regardless and any vehicles such as ours would have to be recovered separately. After looking under the bonnet we soon discovered that one of the fan belts had come off (or had broken) and we had no spares or tools. We certainly felt very lonely at this point, especially as we were all looking forward to getting home. Luckily after about 5 minutes of wondering what to do next (in an age before mobile phones) a very large REME Scammell Crusader recovery truck came along, heading back to the camp and the driver very kindly gave us a tow.

Once back at Sennelager we were met and eyed up by a very disparaging MTO, who didn't really know what to do with us and we were abandoned to our fate in a 'lean to' covered parking area, open to the elements. We explained our problem to the MTO who said he could see what he could do. Now in a 'normal' British Army Land Rover it is a simple job to change the fan belt but in ours we had extra sets of belts for the engine speed governor, used to regulate its speed when powering the generator. As was typical for us it was now getting late in the afternoon. No wonder the MTO came back and said he could not find a REME fitter, as no doubt as they had all knocked off and were all in the mess drinking it up.

The MTO then started saying worrying things like "If it cannot be fixed you will have to be flown home but I don't think I can get you a flight till the end of next week!" We couldn't stand for that as we all had jobs to go to on Monday! We tried to sleep but concrete isn't that easy to sleep on, compared to a leaf covered forest floor, so it was an uncomfortable night. Eventually by some miracle a REME fitter turned up in the early hours before dawn and started work on 63GF74 and after a bit of head scratching, he got the fan belts on and we were ready again. The REME fitter then left to get himself some breakfast.

By this stage in our two week camp we were a little 'miffed' at how things had gone and in a moment of frustration one of us said "bloody Land Rover" and kicked the tire on the back wheel and would you believe it, the tire immediately started going down with air hissing out of it! Well we just looked at each other in amazement. What was it about 63GF74; two crewmen injured so far, a burnt out generator, broken fan belts and now a flat tire! Luckily we had a spare tire on the bonnet so the Land Rover was jacked up in no time and the spare put on. When I learnt how to change a car wheel, I was told never to over tighten the wheel nuts. However my comrades would not listen to my advice and decided to jump up and down on the wheel brace to tighten the nuts, which gave out a scrunching noise. I thought oh heck, the wheel nuts are so tight the studs will break off next! Luckily the studs didn't break but unbeknown to the others I actually wore my helmet in the back of the Land Rover at the start of our journey to Zeebrugge, as I thought we might crash and have only a canvas tilt to protect me! Once we were finally ready it was getting light and we decided not wait for the MTO, who might have attached us to another convoy or made us wait another week, so we just headed for the main gate and 'cleared off' on our own heading west towards Belgium. We knew it was against regulations to travel on our own but we could always pretend we didn't know if we were stopped by MPs. The good thing about the Autobahns in Germany is that they have lay-by rest areas where you can pull off and go to the toilet or eat a picnic. Luckily they also had maps on a large board showing the next 30 miles or more of motorway and the junctions and towns, and these proved to be invaluable to us as we had no maps at all. So by pulling in to these areas every now and then we managed to navigate quite well. In fact we did so well driving at 65 mph instead of 'convoy speed' that we made up quite a lot of lost time

and eventually came upon one of the British Army rest areas set up for the NATO exercise along the route. The rest area was like a massive car park with cones to direct the traffic, the idea being that you pulled in and refuelled from a pile of jerry cans, checked your oil and water then moved off in the coned lanes to a parking area with tented mess hall to get some food. It was then that we spied the rest of 873 but rather than rejoin them and receive a 'doggy bag' containing dreary sandwiches and a boiled egg, we decided on the spur of the moment to 'press on' and have a proper meal in a restaurant nearer to Zeebrugge then drive to the docks. So after refuelling I was told to grab two or three extra jerry cans and shove them in the back of the Land Rover. We then headed back out of the area without being challenged. After an hour or more we arrived in Antwerp and drove round the city looking for a place to eat, all the time towing a Xenon searchlight, which made us quite conspicuous! However we were not impressed with Antwerp so we left, which is just as well as I later found out Antwerp was a major base for the Royal Military Police, tasked with policing troop movements to BAOR! Anyway we drove on to Brugge with its many canals and bridges, where everyone seemed to be on bicycles rather than in cars. Once again we seem to have attracted a lot of glances from the public unused to seeing British Army vehicles in the centre of their historic town! But what did we care, we were starving hungry. Eventually we found a restaurant and parked up right outside. However before going inside we had to deal with a small problem; what to do with our two rifles and a SMG sub machine gun, as we couldn't exactly go in with them over our shoulder!

Luckily I had the chain and padlock used to secure the searchlight cable, so we chained up our weapons and hid them under a pile of kit and camo nets. We then went in to eat but because we only had Deutschmarks we asked if we could still use them to pay. None of us spoke French or Flemish but Alan spoke fluent German and the owner spoke a little too, so we managed to explain what we wanted. I cannot remember what it was we ordered but it was something along the lines of omelette, chips and peas and a coffee, which satisfied our hunger. By now it was mid-afternoon so we thought we better get the bill and get moving. However when we came to pay the bill the owner said no we don't take Deutschmarks! So much for Alan's language skills! Oh dear we thought, what can we do (apart from wash up) but then Alan realised that there was a Bank round the corner, so he ran off up the road and got there just before closing and changed enough currency to pay the bill! Refreshed from our meal we returned to 63GF74, which had remained untouched and untroubled by the local Police, and mounted up and sped off up the road to Zeebrugge. Just after entering the docks we were met by two Land Rovers from 873 (which had formed an Advanced Party) and those we met were very surprised to see us, and assumed that we were still stuck in Sennelager. We obviously didn't mention our scenic tour and just said we had come straight there. Shortly after this everyone else turned up and we were loaded onboard a large Royal Fleet Auxiliary Landing Ship, called 'Sir Percival' and sailed for home back to Harwich. This ship had an interesting career in that in the early 1970's the ship had been used to spy on French nuclear tests in the Pacific fitted with all manner of monitoring equipment and aerials mounted inside and up through the deck. The ship later went to the Falklands in 1982 with its sister ships, Sir Galahad and Sir Tristram both of which were bombed and burnt out at Fitzroy Cove. I found the ship very cramped, as most of the ship was taken up by the hold and so the quarters were below the water line and reached via narrow passages - and not easy to get out of if the ship was on fire! Some of our Land Rovers were winched aboard and stored on deck while others including ours was driven inside but then had to drive up some very steep ramps without side walls so that like a car ferry the floor was raised so that another layer of vehicles could be stored below ours.

Despite enjoying being in the TA, by the end of a two week camp, we were all looking forward to getting home and getting clean. In a way the worst part of the camp was when we arrived back at the Drill Hall in Acton and had to spend time hosing down vehicles, then cleaning everything from weapons, tools and radios and then putting everything away in stores, which seemed to take forever. No wonder no one turned up for TA training on the very next Wednesday evening after camp! Despite being back to normality after annual camp I always found it strange to sleep in a bed for a few days afterwards!

In October 1981 our annual camp in NW Germany was a repeat of the previous year in terms of the support we gave to BAOR. My role was still as the radio op / searchlight operator in the crew; still the junior position as I had not yet passed my driving test. The exercise was not as large as Operation Crusader 80 and I think it was only for the British Army. However when I got to the TA Centre in Acton for the start of the two week camp I learned that I was not going with the main body of men via the Harwich ferry but instead would be flying with the RAF much to my delight. I wasn't happy to see my kit bag go in the vehicles, as I had visions of it being 'relieved of its contents' and I would be left with nothing but the clothes I had on. But anyway it was better to fly than endure a slow road journey. So I ended up getting a coach to RAF Lynham with other members of 73 Engineer Regiment TA where we boarded a Lockheed Hercules, which flew us to RAF Wildenrath. From this you might assume our plane was ready for us at RAF Lynham but in fact we had the usual 'hurry up and wait' routine and had to wait around for ages in a transit room / passenger terminal of sorts.

Once on the Hercules, we sat on canvas seats along the sides of the fuselage as there were piles of stores enclosed in netting and strapped down in the central cargo area. I think we had a lap strap and I know we were told to stay seated once the aircraft started taxiing. As the engines were so noisy, we were advised to wear our ear plugs (the type that we used to push in to our ears when on the rifle range). The passenger windows on a Lockheed Hercules were above our heads so when seated we had no view, and what with the bumpy ride and the noise I thought at one point that we were airborne, only to find out that all this noise was just to get us ready for take-off. Once we were airborne and flying at about 25,000 feet we were allowed to get up and stretch our legs and I spent most of the time looking out of the window as you had to shout to each other in order to have a conversation. I don't think the flight was very long; probably no more than an hour and a half. However once at RAF Wildenrath we had to do some more waiting around in a large hangar until we were taken to Hamelin by coach. Eventually three coaches arrived at RAF Wildenrath to transport all the men and at one point in the journey to the exercise area one of the coaches broke down and the men on the unserviceable coach were transferred to ours. Much to my amazement who should I see boarding but L/Cpl Alan Ball, who sat near me and reminisced with me about the year before!

Except on motorways, our convoys as usual had a habit of going fast, then slow, then stopping, then speeding up, and so on. In this regard, I heard of an amusing incident that occurred during one journey across Europe; one of the lads in a road party was feeling very hungry so he thought it would be a good idea if he jumped out of the back of his transport when the convoy was at a halt and buy some sweets in a shop beside the road, and then run back and jump in again. However his cunning plan to get something to eat had a slight disadvantage in that he never mentioned what he was doing to the people in the front of the vehicle! While he was in the shop the convoy moved off without him, so there he was wondering what to do with no ID or Passport, as the convoy disappeared in to the distance.

He then decided to try and thumb a lift from someone and it wasn't more than a minute before a local stopped in his car and asked what was up, in perfect English of course! After our man had explained what had happened, the local man said to the soldier "Jump in I'll take you as I'm going that way". The driver then sped up the road after the convoy and on a stretch of road, no doubt dual carriage way or wide road, his car managed to overtake the whole convoy. As the driver had no way of stopping the convoy, he said "Look I'll drive a bit further on and drop you beside the road and you can flag them down when they pass". So you can imagine the surprise on the faces of the men in the convoy, especially from his own vehicle, when in the distance they saw their comrade seemingly well ahead of the convoy standing beside the road when all the time they thought he was with them in the back of the vehicle! I'm not sure if this incident happened in Holland or Germany but in the days prior to the Euro I doubt a Dutch sweet shop would have taken Deutschmarks and I doubt our friend would have been so clever to take Dutch Guilders just in case, so it must have been in Germany. On arrival at Hamelin from RAF Wildenrath I discovered that apart from a road party there had also been a rail party for some of the men once they had disembarked from the cross channel ferry. No doubt transporting men by rail was to test various methods of moving troops. But rather than be carried in passenger carriages these men were loaded on to empty freight trucks of a type with a big sliding doors as seen so often in wartime films carrying Jews to Concentration Camps. By all accounts it wasn't a very nice method of travel, being locked in for one's own safety and not very nice I suspect for some of the men of Polish origin whose parents had escaped from the Nazis.

In Operation Crusader 80 many soldiers had died in road accidents and I seem to remember them saying the total was about 64 deaths from all the NATO armies. One of the main reasons for these deaths was driver fatigue especially when driving in a nice warm cab and then falling asleep at the wheel. So for the 1981 autumn exercise we were ordered to remove the side windows from all our vehicles to ensure we had fresh air. On a Land Rover this is quite easy as the door tops with their glass panels are held in place by two bolts. So once we were assembled at the RE Bridging Camp at Hamelin we set about 'converting' our vehicles. The only problem was that whereas Crusader 80 had been carried out in warm dry weather in September, the 1981 exercise was held in October / November 1981 and in pouring rain! With the rear of the canvas tilt always rolled up and no side windows in the cab there was a gale blowing through whenever we were on the move, so our Land Rovers became 'pneumonia wagons'! To keep the cold and rain at bay we had to wear extra clothing. In fact we were like Michelin men in that we wore longjohns, a vest and shirt, over which we wore a quilted jerkin, then Camouflaged Combat jacket and trousers, over which we had to wear our NBC (Nuclear, Biological and Chemical) suit and then the wet weather gear. We were so fat we could hardly move but that wasn't all as once we dismounted we had to put on our webbing belt and pouches and carry a SLR rifle which weighed about 9 lbs. As for removing the windows this may have stopped soldiers falling asleep at the wheel but did nothing for our moral. The open window idea was dropped the following year. Apart from driving without side windows in the rain, we also had problems with mud, which stuck to our Land Rover and our boots when we were deployed in muddy sugar beet fields. Mud also caked the 30 metre cable for the searchlight making recovery difficult and added to its weight. There was no opportunity to clean our kit and anyway it would be dirty the next night, so we just had to live with it. On this exercise I cannot remember a single day when there was good weather but that did not deter the British Army and we were expected to carry on as normal. On exercise we typically

harboured in a wood and slept beside our vehicles under our ponchos or used them like 'lean to' tents. It was therefore up to the Troop Lieutenant or NCO to 'recce' a suitable site but on one occasion during the 1981 exercise we drove in to a wood that was very boggy and totally unacceptable as a camping area. I think Sergeant Terry Curtis soon realised it was a mistake especially as it was pouring with rain which would only make things worse. Tempers were a little frayed when vehicles were directed to disperse to positions deeper in the wood and in doing so duly sank up to their axles. Sadly my Land Rover and Searchlight got completely bogged down in a position where it could not easily be recovered (down a slope). Added to this, another driver said I'm stuck too (even in four wheel drive) and with the light fading an NCO ordered him out of the vehicle and had a go himself. He would show us how it was done but then promptly drove the Land Rover forward at speed straight over a tree stump! The Land Rover was now stuck with the front axle on the stump and the front wheels in mid-air but luckily the axle was undamaged. I don't think our laughter helped the situation but luckily there were enough of us to haul the vehicle off the stump and get it moving again. With the realisation that the constant rain was making the track in to the wood even worse than when we arrived and with the potential to trap the whole Troop, the decision was made to move out as soon as possible and find another harbour area. To safeguard our bogged in Land Rover, the vehicle Commander and the driver were ordered to stay with the Land Rover. However as I was 'surplus' I was ordered to get in another vehicle but with no time to spare I could not recover my sleeping bag or kit. I therefore only had the clothes I was wearing plus my SLR 7.62mm rifle and webbing pouches. As it turned out I did not see my kit for nearly a week and I had to sleep rough for that period. I did have my parka with me but at night it was freezing and I certainly missed my warm waterproof sleeping bag. I think the 1981 autumn exercise in Germany was one of the wettest as I have memories of rain and mud.

I also remember seeing a Troop of Chieftain tanks coming out of a wood at night and as they were heading towards us we all pulled over to one side of the road to let them pass. It was very disconcerting to be sitting in the passenger seat of the Land Rover, with Chieftains passing by my door less than 2 feet away, especially as the tanks had their hatches closed with no one up top to spot for dangers. The last tank in the Troop had some wire trapped in its track guard, and as it passed I could see it was pulling a section of farmer's fence behind it, complete with wooded posts, with the driver totally aware! As for returning home in 1981 I cannot remember any of us being flown back to RAF Lynham at all, so we must have all come back by Ferry. I think it may have been via Wilhelmshaven.

I know I was there on one occasion as I remember standing on the dock thinking it wasn't that long ago that the RAF Bomber Command were bombing this place (at the time just 35 years before) and wondering how many unexploded bombs there were in the dock. If it left from a German port the journey would have been quite long to get home and was probably the time when a few of us discovered the ship had a sauna and a swimming pool, which we made use of. The trouble with swimming was that we had no trunks so swam in our underpants which like a wet T-shirt, became quite see-through but then what did we care as no one else was swimming, as the sea was rough and the water in the pool was sloshing from side to side in great waves!

Driver training in the TA was on an ad hoc basis. I could have passed my driving test well before 1982 but training was a bit haphazard, in that driver training in a Land Rover was only

available from one of the NCOs on a Saturday morning, if he was available to turn up. So it wasn't very regular and on a couple of occasions I got note to say that I would be taking an Army Driving test at Woolwich Barracks. When I asked about the training I was advised that this would be given on the journey! But of course this did not cover all the test requirements, such as reversing round a corner, which in a Land Rover has to be done differently than in a car due to the larger turning circle. I remember failing one of these tests for this reason. On another test I was doing a three point turn in a quiet street in Woolwich when a dog decided to sit down in the middle of the road in front of my Land Rover and raised its leg neatly in the air and started to lick its 'parts'! I was worried that I might fail my test for incorrect use of the horn but anticipating my dilemma the Sergeant tester said don't worry son if it doesn't clear off when you beep the horn, I'll get out and kick where it hurts! In the end I passed my driving test in early 1982 with a civilian driving school. Once I had my driver's licence I was promoted to L/Cpl and became Troop Commanders driver/radio op as the unit knew I was good at signaling, codes and map reading. This job was far more rewarding than being the third man in a Xenon crew and was quite involved as I had to drive, map read, and work the radio or at least keep a listening watch on the move with one ear piece in place. All I had to do was drive the Troop Commander where ever he wanted. In 1982 we went again by North Sea Ferry and I think it was on this occasion that the ferry company refused to let the men have any access to the cabins, so we had to sleep in the corridors. There were no civilians on board at all. I was flat on my back with the ship rising and falling with the waves but it was the smell of sweaty feet and bodies that started to make me feel a bit queasy so I gave up trying to sleep and went on deck instead.

As far as the Troop Commanders Land Rover FFR was concerned it was now my sole responsibility. I used to pack the vehicle as I wanted and brewed up and got the food but luckily I never got treated like a batman.

Often I would drive over farmland and through forests, and I even remember joining a German dual carriageway by driving down the embankment from a field leaving a trail of mud behind me, while at the same time remembering to turn on to road in the right direction so as to be on the correct side of the road! On another occasion I drove down a 'v' shaped gully with a small stream running through it, with the wheels of the Land Rover FFR either side of the stream. I also drove down the road that was clearly marked road closed; however when we came round a bend and saw that the road had been washed away down the hillside there was no arguing with that so I had to do a U turn.

The first Troop Commander I drove was Lieutenant Jones who had recently joined 873 and who I liked as he would often ask my opinion; I remember on exercise near Upavon that the searchlights were not getting the effect we wanted on a night exercise and he asked me what I thought so I suggested elevating the lights another 10 mils, which did the trick. Sadly he was killed in a road accident in 1982 so I drove for another Officer after that. Although the new Officer was very proficient he hardly spoke and gave very little info away on what we would be doing which annoyed me a little. On a visit to 2nd Division Main HQ in a German forest one night he went into HQ and following the correct drill I quickly camouflaged the vehicle with black hessian and camo nets and poles. However the Troop Commander was only gone about 10 minutes, and when he returned he could not find the Land Rover! If he had only told me I could have got away with just covering the windscreen and lights with hessian.

As the Troop Commanders driver and head of the convoy it was important for me to know what was being planned. Yet on an exercise in Germany in 1982 the Troop Commander still did not think it necessary to include me in O Groups he had with the other Corporals who were in command of the Xenon Searchlights. However this was soon to change! On a subsequent daylight movement of the complete Squadron to a new location north west of Celle, I remember saying to the Troop Commander something along the lines of where are we going today, to which he said "Don't worry I'll direct you", to which I said "very good Sir". Then during the journey I remember saying "Is this our turning" to which he said "No don't worry, keep driving on this road and I'll tell you where to turn" (on a rather straight and boring road through flat German farmland). I might even have asked the Troop Commander more than twice whether the junction ahead was the one to take as in a convoy it is good to let the vehicles behind know in advance so they can all signal and get in position or get in the right lane for the turning. The trouble was that the Troop Commander then fell asleep and it wasn't for me to wake him so I just obeyed the last order and kept on driving on and on along the main road, with every other vehicle in the convoy dutifully following on behind totally ignorant of the situation. After about half an hour or more the Troop Commander woke up with a start and discovered that we had missed our turning. Of course he could not say anything to me and could only blame himself. In order to get us back on track we could either do a U-turn which was out of the question with a convoy or we could take the next right turn. However the right turn we took led us up and over a steep hill, which zigzagged all the way and I remember seeing all the Bedford RLs behind me lumbering up the hills and round sharp bends at no more than 15 mph. I also remember seeing locals staring in amazement at our vehicles driving through such an out of the way place. But then I was also amazed when I saw the place name; Belsen as in Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp, a place I never expected to visit, hidden in the hills north of Hanover! No doubt due to this detour we were more than an hour late at our RV. Not surprisingly after that episode I was then included in O Groups and we never got lost again. I even had a map to read on my lap while driving and also listening in on the radio net.

Every now and then I think the 'top brass' thought it was a good idea to send TA units for specialist training in the UK rather than go on exercise. So in 1983 the 873 Annual Camp was to be in the summer rather than the autumn and would be spent at Chickerell RE Bridging Camp near Weymouth in order to brush up on our Field Engineering skills. With the proposed annual camp now set for the prime holiday season, this caused problems for me at work as it would mean that I would be off work for a month (having my own two week holiday and then a two week annual camp) just when everyone else wanted leave in the summer holidays; especially if they had children. Also the thought of two weeks in the UK did not really appeal to me either. Luckily however, I got advanced warning that 873 would also be required to send one Troop to Germany as an additional requirement in October and this would also count as an annual two week camp, so I quickly put my name down to go. As it transpired not many put their names down for both!

So in October 1983 I was given the job of Commander of a Land Rover & Searchlight with a driver and Searchlight Operator Signaller, as one of the four Searchlights. My Land Rover was 63GF17 and towed a modified Xenon for the first time with the other two crew members borrowed from another TA unit in 73 Engineer Regiment. During this exercise I remember we were shining the Xenon towards some distant target and our orders were to 'cease fire' at a certain time and then drive to our harbour area in a farm. Normally on exercise we would be

met by the Troop Commander or Sergeant and led to the harbour area. However on this occasion we were required to pack up and return individually. The only trouble was that by then a very thick fog had descended over the area that night and we had never been to the farm before! I therefore had to make sure we found it or be abandoned to our fate. Luckily, I read the map perfectly by torchlight in the front of the Land Rover and by noting features that corresponded with the map I directed the driver to the farm about five or six miles from our original location without any problems. Considering how bad the fog was and the fact that we were in an unfamiliar area, I considered this to be one of my major achievements while being I the TA. I can only guess what would have happened to us if we had got lost as it wasn't as if we could go back to barracks or ask another unit, for we were miles away from Hamelin or Osnabruck and in the dead of night the roads were deserted. Having run the generator all night we were also low on fuel!

Apart from supporting BAOR in their autumn exercises, 873 attended equipment demonstrations for Officer Cadets at Sandhurst and other places. One I remember well was a mid-week night firing demonstration at Imber on Salisbury Plain which involved the Army firing off every type of weapon it had from 7.62 mm tracer rounds, hand held rocket launchers, wire guided missiles, right up to Chieftain Tanks firing Anti-Tank shells at disused tank targets thousands of yards away. After we had done our bit we would sit on the grandstand with all the other personnel and watch the rest of the 'show'. I found these demonstrations very interesting and will never forget the sound of the Chieftain tanks firing (a noise more like saying the word 'chunk' instead of 'bang') and watching their shells hit old tanks in the distance before ricocheting up into the air. In addition to the demos on Salisbury Plain some of our Searchlights were also used to support night firing trials of Swingfire wire guided missiles from FV102 Strikers (a tracked armoured vehicle) one winter on a snow covered firing range at Otterburn, Northumberland. I have no details of the trials but those from 873 who returned commented that the crews who were firing the missiles seemed very nervous and smoked almost nonstop. When asked why they explained that more than a few missiles had gone 'vertical' instead of horizontally towards the target and they feared for their own safety!

I enjoyed my service with 873 but by 1984 work commitments and marriage soon got in the way, so I later transferred to 130 Field Regiment in 111 Engineer Regt RE (V) based in Farnborough which was much less demanding of my time. The camaraderie in 130 Field Sqn was OK but not as close as 873, as we met less often. I think that we met about four times a year plus a two week camp, but to me the men seemed far less experienced especially working at night!

On one field exercise with 130 Field Sqn the Staff Sergeant I was with in an FFR Land Rover seemed to think it was better to use whatever branches were available in the woods to hold down the camo net and told me to put away my metal tent pegs which I had brought along. As far as he was concerned the camo net would be held down with twigs; damp breakable ones as it turned out. As predicted the camo nets covering the vehicle soon broke loose and fell over his face knocking his glasses off one side of his head, just like Captain Mainwaring in Dad's Army! I even think he blamed me! It was at this point I decided I'd had enough so I left the TA for good in July 1986.

After I left 873 Movement Light Sqn RE (V) carried on its role for another nine years. Strangely the unit withdrew its Land Rovers and towed Xenons from service circa 1989 and replaced them with Francis FX710 7kW 62 cm Xenon lights (rated at 1 Million Candle Power) and generators both mounted on the back of Bedford MJ four ton trucks which to me seems a retrograde step. In 1993, 873 Movement Light Squadron RE (V) was disbanded no doubt as night vision aids had improved to a point that 'artificial moonlight' was no longer needed. Whatever the reason, disbandment of 873 brought to an end the operational use of searchlights in the British Army after 100 years. Horn Lane was then given to the Royal Logistics Corp (which I considered joining in 1995) but later the Drill Hall was demolished to make way for new flats! As for the AN/TVS-3 30-inch Xenon Searchlights, the one I towed in 1983 is now in the RE Museum. I also happened to see some others for sale on the internet in 2009 when they were on sale for £800 each. Apparently they had been modified and used by a lighting company with less powerful lights so I wasn't tempted to buy one – well not unless I could have found a Land Rover 'Generating Set, Truck Mounted, 25KVA, but then I'm sure all the generators would have been removed before the Land Rovers were 'cast' in the early 1990's.

Overall I enjoyed my time in the TA and wished I'd stayed with 873 for longer. It only seems like yesterday when I joined but in fact it's near 30 years ago that I left!

Larry Hayward (ex-L/Cpl)

April 2015