



MERCIANRY TALES

I thought that it was about time that someone committed to paper some of the exploits, stories, tales, or downright lies, (as the case may be).

So pull up a convenient sandbag and share with me some of the wit and wisdom of that happy band of warriors known as the Mercian Volunteers.

I can vouch for the truth of several of the following stories because I was there and witnessed them for myself. In the case the many anecdotes passed on to me by my ex-comrades, I can only say that they sound as if they are true, and even if they're not, then they should be.

Ex-squaddies, wherever they are have tales to tell, and the Mercians are no exception.

They follow in the footsteps of the 'Iron Duke' himself, who also liked to reminisce, and often told the story of the day that he met a little boy, sitting crying by the side of the road.

When the Duke asked him why he was carrying on so, the boy replied that he had to go away to school and there was no-one to care for his pet toad. Keen to ease the little chap's discomfort, the Duke promised to attend to the matter personally. After the boy had been at school for just over a week, he received a letter: "Field Marshall, the Duke of Wellington presents his compliments to Master ----- and has the pleasure of informing him that his toad is well".

So as you see, we are in good company.

By the way, the Duke also said,

"I don't know what effect these men will have on the enemy, but by God, they frighten me".

I can only agree with those sentiments.

Frankie

Pride of place in this tribute must go to 'Little Frankie'. He was indeed, a legend in his own lunchtime.

It had been difficult to find a job that suited Frank's particular talents, but at long last he found his niche as Officers Mess Steward.

One fine day, at Swinnerton, the CO arrived unexpectedly, in company with the Brigade Commander and entourage. Frankie was extremely busy clearing away the remains of the previous meal when the CO asked him if he could arrange for a cup of tea.

Exasperatedly, Frankie banged down the tray of crocks that he was carrying, with a loud crash, onto the table, stared hard at the surprised gathering in front of him, and uttered the immortal words. "I suppose your fucking mates want one an' all, doe they?"

Yes Indeed, always a democratic bunch, the Mercian's.

Phone Etiquette

This was passed on to me by one the less reputable members of our Regiment, well known for his tall-tales, so you all know exactly who I mean.

The incident reputedly happened during an annual camp at Otterburn, and while he was reporting for duty as fire piquet, he was approached by a stranger, a tall, well dressed gentleman, wearing a very smart trilby hat and an immaculate light coloured raincoat. He was asked, rather curtly, if he had change for the telephone.

Being of a naturally polite nature, our hero said, "I'm sure I 'ave, If you'll just 'ang on a bit mate, I'll 'ave a look for you".

At this, the stranger went ballistic and berated the poor chap with, "Do you know who I am? Is this the way you speak to an Officer? Now, I will ask you once again. Do you have change for the phone?"

Without any hesitation whatsoever our intrepid champion came abruptly to attention and replied, crisply, "No –Sir"

Frankie Again

Dear old Frankie also enjoyed an occasional swim. During an annual camp, at Sennelager, there was a chance to make use of their magnificent swimming facilities.

Unfortunately, Frankie had left his bathing kit back in the UK. But fear not, he came up with idea of wearing a pair of blue, issue PE shorts, so large that they that they needed to be held in place with a web-belt.

Now, dear reader, imagine if you will, this rather diminutive figure, clad in makeshift trunks, fastened just below his armpits, and reaching down almost to his ankles, making his way in the bright sunshine towards the inviting water.

Frankie ignored the incredulous stares as he approached the edge of the pool and pausing only for effect, he executed a glorious swan-dive which took him straight to the bottom.

A graceful turn and a gentle kick sent him swiftly to the surface. Climbing the steps out of the pool for an encore, Frankie realised that he was now minus his 'swimming trunks'.

This, in itself, would not have been disastrous except for the presence of numerous family members from the married quarters attached to the camp. Our hero may be small in stature, but this description could not be applied in general.

Without so much as the blink of an eye Frankie nonchalantly dived back into the water, retrieved his bathing attire, and continued as if it was an everyday occurrence.

Good old Frankie.

The Camp on a Hill

Vogelsang is a fantastic place, built originally as a Hitler youth camp in the 1930's and, foolishly, trusted to the Mercian Volunteers' in the 1980's to enable us to further our training .

The over-riding problem with Vogelsang is the amount of climbing involved. The entire camp is carved out of the side of a very steep mountainside, with 150 steps, or more, to the cook-house situated at the top of the hill. Everything is built on a slope.

On one memorable occasion, an un-named cook forgot to secure the handbrake on one of the water bowzers, with obvious consequences.

Picture the scene. The bowser began to roll slowly down the steep mountainside, gathering speed with every turn of its wheels. One brave cook decided to take matters into his own hands and tried to stop the escaping vehicle by hanging onto the towing-eye with both hands and digging his heels into the concrete path.

Witnesses to this act of bravery later said that it resembled the scene from that award winning film, 'The Pride and the Passion', when Frank Sinatra and Cary Grant tried in vain to stop the huge canon. Harold Lloyd would have been proud of him.

Our hero managed to hang on for about 30 feet or more as the runaway gathered pace, destroying bushes, trees, and anything else that impeded its progress.

Discretion, however, eventually came to his rescue and he wisely decided to let go and leave it to the REME to recover at a later date. Well done that man.

Joe

The adjutant stared in disbelief at the apparition of the figure sauntering across the immaculate lawn.

His explicit instruction, published in Battalion Orders, to keep off the grass at all times, was being openly, and blatantly, disobeyed.

Joe Zammit was a signaller with Headquarter Coy, and he was returning from a late breakfast after being on duty all night. With his beret tucked under his left epaulette, and his belt thrown over the other shoulder, Joe was too busy eating his egg, bacon and sausage sandwich, dripping with tomato sauce, to notice the irate Officer watching him.

Waiting only until Joe had cleared the green sward; the Adjutant confronted Joe and berated him for his misdemeanour. Unfortunately, the said signaller, being Maltese, understood only about half of what was being said to him. So the Adjutant gave Joe a note to pass on to his Platoon Commander. The note explained what had happened, the sender's vain attempt to convey his displeasure, and recommended that the culprit 'be eliminated'

This upset Joe, and later, in the second week, when he was on duty as relay station, the Adjutant did a radio check and managed to raise everyone except Joe.

Fearing that something may have happened to him, we set out to investigate his non-show on the radio.

When we arrived at his location he appeared to be safe and sound, thank God. When we asked him why he hadn't answered the call, he said, "I'm not talking to *that* man"

Good old Joe.

Fire Alarm

Word got round the camp that there was to be a 'surprise' fire alarm sometime during the day. Almost everyone was stood down following a three day exercise so the atmosphere was pretty relaxed.

With nothing else to do, we were all alert and prepared for the *unexpected* alarm. But not quite as alert as the cooks, the only people actually working that day.

Whilst they were busy preparing the mid-day meal, they spotted a small, secretive group of would-be arsonists setting fire to a pile of oily rags in an old oil drum at the rear of the kitchens.

Seizing their opportunity, as soon as the fire-party had departed, the cooks jumped out of a window and armed with fire fighting equipment, doused the fire before it had even starts.

The fire alert was duly sounded and the entire camp turned out to witness a few pathetic, dwindling, wispy, columns of smoke rising idly in the still, late morning air.

You can always trust the cooks.

Pronto

A Signals Officer, who shall remain nameless, was giving his early morning briefing to his platoon. They were assembled on the vehicle park outside the Signal stores. The vehicle park was shared with the MT platoon.

Looking around for something to stand on to make his delivery easier, he spotted a Land Rover with the tail-board in the down position and seizing his opportunity, he mounted the make-shift stage and began his speech.

He was not too far into his announcements when the door to the MT office swung open and a very harassed looking Corporal came dashing out. With a sheaf of papers held under his arm, the stressed NCO dived into the cab of the waiting Land Rover and without a second glance, engaged first gear and made a noisy, racing start, ejecting Pronto, spread-eagled, face down onto the unforgiving tarmac.

Not one of us laughed – honestly.

Cooks Again

The Mercians held an annual camp at Thetford and, as is normal during the second week, we had our three day exercise. The hard pressed cooks couldn't find Headquarter Coy for their main meal.

After much searching, the missing Company was located and the cooks decided to re-heat the chicken and send it out to them. The result was about sixty soldiers developed severe cases of the trots, all at once.

It was so bad that the stores quickly ran out of shovels. The MO had foreseen this shortage and had been among the first to sign one of the implements out for his own, personal use.

It is rumoured that respirators with Old Spice in the filters worked wonders.

Elite

The Mercians were known as 'The Elite'. The QM was heard to say, on many occasions, "This lot e'lite anything".

Honest Mistake

This incident was passed on to me by a well-known and much loved Colour Sergeant, to avoid embarrassment I won't name him. But a clue to his identity is that he had to change his rank from 'Staff' Sgt because of the similarity with his Christian name.

I can't vouch for it being true, because I know the character, but it sounds good.

The TA centre was being honoured with a visit from a local dignitary and his wife. Before he left to meet the distinguished pair, the Commanding Officer asked the Colour Sergeant to arrange for three cheers to greet the party when they entered the Drill Hall.

He had overlooked the fact that the Company was based in the heart of the Black Country, and as he led his guests through the main doors, he was greeted by yours truly with the words, "Sorry Sir, I couldn't find three cheers, will these stools do instead?"

You may need to know something of the Black Country dialect to appreciate this

RSM's Nightmare

The RSM was standing on the doorstep of his office at the end of a perfect day. Whilst he was surveying the expanse of his domain, the Company bugler began to play, and the haunting strains of the 'Last Post' rang out across the camp. As the RSM was congratulating himself at how good life could be, his gaze settled on a lonely figure shuffling slowly across the parade ground. The Sgt Major's voice rang out even louder than the bugle. "Stand still that man", he screamed.

The poor individual froze in terror as the realisation of his 'crime' slowly began to sink in. He came neatly to attention with the rapidity of a guilty party trying desperately to make amends.

When the last notes of the bugle had diminished, the RSM summoned the hapless soldier to his presence. The sad faced squaddie marched quickly to within two feet of his Nemesis, and drew himself, ram-rod straight, to attention.

"Did you not hear that?" Roared the RSM, pointing across the square at the lone musician. "What was he playing?"

The miserable wretch stood for a moment, deep in thought. Then his face suddenly brightened as he threw back his head smartly, and said proudly, "I think it was a bugle sir"

I believe he became something of a legend among his comrades after that.

Inflatable

During a patrol competition, we had to do an ‘advance to contact’ which involved a river crossing. You must realise that I was not at all confident about being on the water, (at the time I was non-swimmer).

We approached the river with all due caution. Our embarkation point was hidden somewhere in the dense undergrowth. We rendezvoused with our guide, who led us down the steep riverbank to the water’s edge.

Judging by the amount of churned up mud; we obviously weren’t the first to make the trip. Moored alongside the mud were two semi-inflatable craft, each one capable of carrying half of the patrol.

Easing our way through the sticky mire, we hauled ourselves aboard the flimsy looking boats and assumed an all-round defence. The craft pulled away from its mooring and began to make its way upstream towards our landing site. I was mid-way along the starboard side and feeling distinctly uncomfortable about being in the middle of a fast flowing river.

It wasn’t long before I became aware that someone behind me was whistling softly, through his teeth. He continued this irritating, tuneless whistle for the entire voyage, which seemed never ending. At last, we reached our designated landing place, equally as muddy as our point of departure.

Carefully, we disembarked. I was the last to leave the boat and I suddenly realised that the whistling was still going on. Glancing at the stern of the craft, I was horrified to see a tired looking patch of rubber, idly flapping about as the air escaped from the floats.

The bloody thing was *leaking*. It was *deflating*. For God’s sake, *it was going down*.

I don’t remember how I got to firm, dry land. However, I do know it was quick. (This escapade gave me the incentive to learn to swim).

Owd Roger, (Beware)

I will tell this tale exactly as it was related to me by an ex-Signals Platoon colleague of mine. He swears that it is true, so who am I to question thus.

It was on one of those rare occasions when the Sig/s Plt were allowed a few hours off. We had camped in our 9x9's in a field situated conveniently close to a hostelry, about a mile from Stone. Radio duty stags were being alternated, and we took it in turns manning the 'net'. In the meantime, off-duty bods' either caught up with their sleep, or sampled the local ale at the nearby inn. I myself settled for the latter.

Having quickly found, and entered, the public bar, I was met with a friendly 'buzz' of conversation from the many locals ensconced in the large, well-lit room. Casting my eye over the array of ale's on offer, I took my pick from one of the many 'pulls' lining the bar, and asked the barman for a pint of 'Owd Roger'.

The entire room sank into an eerie silence, and I felt every eye in the place turn to gape at me in amazement. The landlord gave me a long, intensive stare. Then, in solemn tones, asked me if I was driving. "No I'm not" I replied, and slowly the 'buzz' resumed.

Much later, I returned to my tent and was navigating a course across strangely sloping terrain. Negotiating fields that I am sure had been flat just a few hours previously. Reaching the safety of my bivvy, I lay down and just before dozing off to sleep, I remembered thinking, "Who forgot to tie the guy ropes down?" I probably wouldn't have noticed if the wind hadn't been making the tent spin and rotate so violently.

In the morning, as we moved off, I managed, despite having developed a speech impediment during the night, to utter the signaller's prayer, the immortal words, "Hellooo θ this 4, mooovinng noooow, out.

Oh! My head! Altogether, an educational experience.

It certainly taught me a lesson anyway.

Bob's Place

Whilst we were packing our kit for annual camp at Vogelsang in Germany, someone mentioned that the one Mark coin was exactly the same size as the British Shilling and the exchange rate, at the time, was better than four Marks to the Pound. Forearmed with this information, many of the assembled took more than a few of the aforementioned coins with them when we embarked for Vogelsang.

This came to light when, on the middle weekend, one of the Companies decided to arrange their 'Do' at a local hostelry in Gemund. The owner of the establishment was only too happy to oblige, but solely on the condition that he be reimbursed for the English coinage that had been fed into his cigarette machine over the previous week. I have no idea how many coins were involved, but I am assured that there were a lot.

From then on, that pub was known as 'Bob's Place'

A Good Night's Sleep

There are many memorable events that occurred at annual camps, and one the springs readily to mind happened during our stay at Pennicuik, just outside Edinburgh. Towards the end of the first week, the Battalion was engaged in an advance to contact, preceded by a water crossing over Loch Earn and a long, weary trek over Ben Vorlich.

On the first night of the exercise, the sig/s platoon and the cooks were allocated the bed of a disused railway as a bivvy area, minus the rails, but complete with sharp, flint-like stones that were used to carry the track.

Luckily they were surrounded by mature Fir trees, the branches of which, they cut down in abundance to provide bedding material, all but denuding the nearest of the trees. Primitive, maybe, but I must admit that it is difficult for me to recall a more comfortable bed. Feather mattresses are a poor second to the springiness of those boughs. Indeed we rested in the 'Arms of Morpheus' that night. Unfortunately for us however, an order 'forbidding the defacement of trees' had not reached our location, and the following day a very angry OC berated the culprits and demanded an explanation. Not surprisingly he was less than impressed by the excuse that it was, "Not mutilation sir, merely drastic pruning"

Truthfully though, that was one the most comfortable night's sleep, under canvas that I can remember.

Electric

During one annual camp, the Battalion was split between two sites, half at one site and half at the other, switching locations during the middle week-end. The Sig/s Platoon obviously provided the communications for the move. This meant the setting up of a relay station on the top of an intervening mountain chain. Two signallers were duly dispatched; complete with C42's in a fitted-for-radio, three quarter ton, Land-Rover.

They arrived at the designated map reference, and under a rapidly darkening sky, established contact. The chosen location was indeed, beautiful. Flat moorland filled with purple heather, and with the call of the abundant Curlew filling the air, they set the radios to 'rebroadcast' and proceeded with the important task of getting a brew sorted.

The already dark clouds got even darker and began to gather menacingly, so it came as no surprise to the pair when it started to rain. Sheltering in the back of the Rover, the two hapless squaddies watched as the rain got heavier and heavier.

As the weather worsened the sky was suddenly lit up by a blinding flash of lightning, followed almost immediately by an ear-splitting rumble of thunder. It was at this moment that the two operators realised they were sited on an almost perfectly flat moor, sitting in a vehicle in the middle of a thunderstorm, sporting a very tall lightening conductor, (AKA antennae), reaching high into the heavens. Discretion proving the better part of valour, they decided that the rain was probably the least of their worries, so they sat a short distance from the Rover, under cover of a poncho, sipping luke-warm tea and monitoring radio traffic from there.

I can vouch for this, as I am sure that this is one of the reasons for the colour of my hair. (Age has nothing to do with it).

How Far?

Whilst on guard duty during the first week-end of my first camp, I was lucky enough to witness the following.

The 2 IC of the guard, a very well turned out Lance Corporal, was manning the desk of the guard-room when an extremely red faced and obviously irate Officer entered, and strode briskly to the desk. Facing the, by now flustered, newly promoted NCO. The angry looking Officer, in a loud voice, demanded to know how far it was to the nearest village.

The wretched squaddie considered this for a moment, and then replied, “About four and a half, or thereabouts”. In an even louder voice, and breathing audibly through his nose, the Officer demanded, “Four and a half WHAT?”

The poor hapless soul looked even more distraught as he struggled for an answer. Then his face lit up as his brain engaged first gear, and he replied brightly, “Four and a half – SIR!”

MT Moments

Some actual maintenance complaints from MT drivers, and the response from the REME.

(Source Unknown)

Problem - 'When in low gears, the engine is missing'

Solution - 'After a brief search, the engine was found beneath the bonnet.'

Problem - 'Lots of dead flies on the windscreen'

Solution - 'Live flies on order'

Problem - 'Something loose in cab'

Solution - 'Something tightened in cab'

Problem - 'Evidence of brake fluid leaking from off-side rear'

Solution - 'Evidence removed'

Problem - 'Front near-side tyre almost needs replacing'

Solution - 'near-side front tyre almost replaced'

Cooks Yet Again

The Headquarter Coy cooks were again trying to find the lost company. After driving for what seemed like hours and covering every track and pathway for miles around, they were called to a halt by an alert, and heavily camouflaged, sentry.

The sentry gave the first part of the pass-word, "Roast Beef" The, by now, thoroughly pissed off driver/cook replied, "Don't be a prat, its stew again"

Another Signaller's tale

During a quiet period of a conflict, (they do occur occasionally), a Signaller asked Control, (via the radio), for permission to switch to stand-by, permission was duly granted.

A while later, Control tried to contact the aforesaid signaller, and after the second attempt, he was interrupted by a transmission from the Signals 2ic who reminded him, "You gave him permission to switch to stand-by"!

Control replied, somewhat testily, "It only takes 30 seconds to switch from Stand-by"!

The Signaller intervened "Yes, but it takes more than 30 seconds to get out of a Sleeping bag"!

Silence reigned for a few minutes after.....