

Memories of the Mandate

Seventy years after the British withdrawal from Palestine, **BILL WATTS** looks back at what it was like to stand between a rock and a hard place – while trying to avoid being blown sky high by a fire in the cookhouse.

After three years service with the Air Training Corp, I volunteered for the RAF in December 1943, and was accepted for PNB (Pilot Navigator Bomb Aimer) training, but was placed on deferred service as all the flying training schools were full.

Ten months later I was just one of several thousand RAF volunteers who were informed that their services were no longer required and were given the chance of volunteering for the mines or enlisting in the army. I chose the army but my reasons for volunteering for The Parachute Regiment were very naive.

After completing my first six weeks in the army marching around the Mountains of Mourne, in ill-fitting army boots, my feet were covered in painful blisters and I began to wonder whether I would cope when the training got really tough. The solution came with the arrival of a Captain from The Parachute Regiment, smartly dressed, with a red beret, who was looking for new recruits to reinforce the Regiment after the disastrous losses at Arnhem. When he described how we would be transported to the battlefield by air and then dropped by parachute I was well and truly hooked, deciding that not only would this be very exciting but, with no more long route marches, would also mean the end of blistered feet. However, what the captain failed to mention was that the Paras marched further and faster than most regiments – matched only by the SAS and Commandos.

In June 1945, after completing my weapons and parachute training, I was posted to the 3rd Battalion, which was reforming after 500 Officers and men were dropped at Arnhem but only one officer and 36 other ranks returned. Although the battalion included several officers,



Sgt Bill Watts in Palestine

NCOs and men who had fought in Europe, the majority were 18/19 year-olds like myself who joined the Regiment in 1944. The battalion was originally destined for Burma but in September 1945, following the capitulation of Japan, we embarked for Palestine.

Our first camp was in a makeshift one in the desert at Gaza, but after a month or so we were moved to Tel Litvinsky, a modern camp, which even had a swimming pool. During our off-duty hours we were able to visit the modern city of Tel Aviv, with its beautiful beaches and a promenade full of bars and cafes, which was just a few miles from our camp. In the early days everyone was very friendly and I can remember being invited to the homes of Jewish families who went out of their way to make us welcome.

However, after the King David Hotel was bombed in January 1946 everything changed with the start of

'search and seek' raids on kibbutzim. Palestine police and army intelligence would pass information to Airborne Division HQ who would pass it on to the battalion, and the raid would take place before dawn with Palestine intelligence officers in attendance. One raid discovered an arms cache in an underground bunker beneath the children's Maypole which, while turning, was an ingenious means of circulating fresh air underground when the bunker was occupied during the daytime.

As a member of HQ company I was not involved with the search and seek raids and apart from occasional night patrols in Jerusalem and guard duties most of my time was spent within the camp perimeter. The closest I ever came to being shot or blown up was when the battalion was moving into Peninsular Barracks and I was in the advance party. On our very first night the camp was completely



On patrol in the desert

destroyed following a fire in the kitchen which spread to our arsenal.

On 25 April 1946 seven men of 5th Scottish Parachute Battalion were massacred by the Irgun Zvai Leumi whilst guarding the lorry park in Tel Aviv. The lorries were used to transport army personnel into Tel Aviv for a day or night out and at that time Palestine was classed as a type of Home posting so that the only protection the men carried whilst on duty were pick helms as a deterrent to petty thieving. This senseless and criminal act by Zionist terrorists shocked every British serviceman in

Palestine, particularly those members of The Parachute Regiment who had fought the Nazis in Europe thus helping to free the survivors of the Holocaust. However it did make us realise what ruthless organisations we were facing. We had some respect for the Hagana, which also carried out attacks on British military targets but remained a highly disciplined force avoiding unnecessary casualties.

After several British servicemen were shot by terrorists on motorcyclés, we were ordered to travel in fours and carry personal weapons, when visiting local bars.

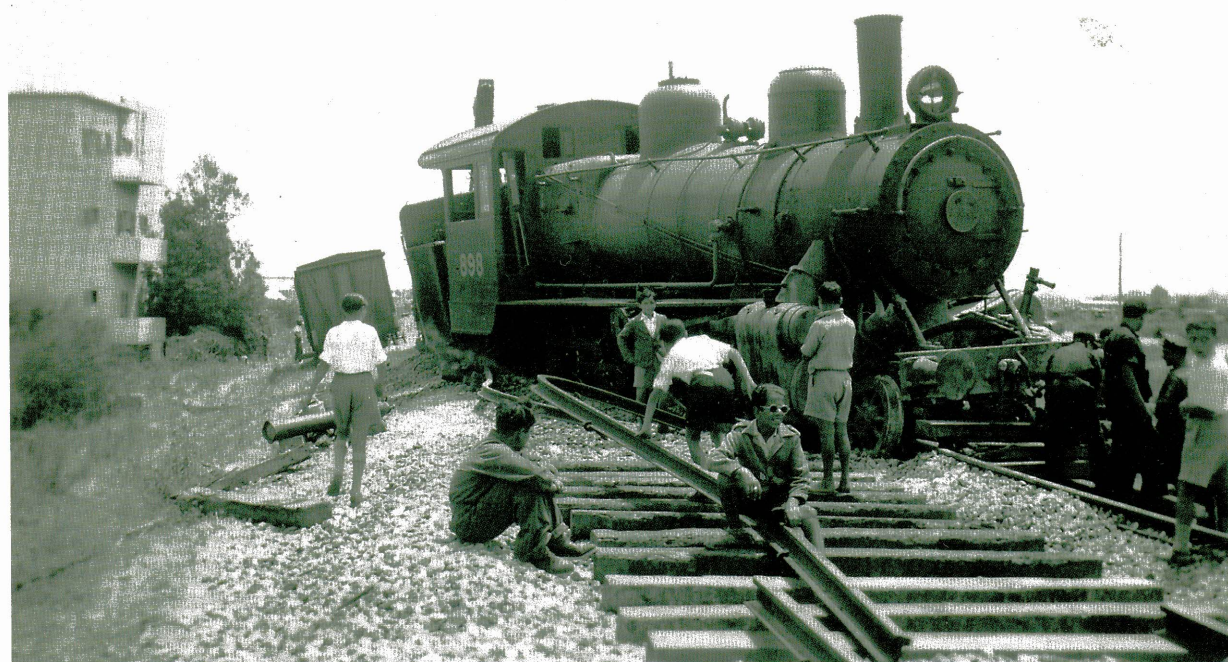
We were also advised to sit facing the road to avoid getting shot in the back. Losing your personal weapon was a court martial offence but it was difficult to relax and enjoy a drink whilst taking care of our rifles. So, as the attacks continued, most servicemen decided it was more relaxing to spend their off-duty evenings in the NAAFI

The Underground

Following the sentence of death on three Jews convicted of taking part in the raid on Acre prison the Irgun Zvai Leumi kidnapped two British NCOs who were later found hanging from a eucalyptus tree. The area for some distance around was mined and as one of the bodies was cut down it exploded having been booby-trapped. The IZL claimed that this was not a retaliatory act but 'an ordinary legal action of the court of the Underground which has sentenced and will sentence the criminals who belong to the criminal Nazi-British army of occupation'.

To Jewish children we became 'The red berets with the black hearts', and they would follow us chanting 'kalanyot' – the name of a flower similar to a poppy. We could well understand the frustration of the Jewish people at the immigration quotas set under the Mandate but we could never understand why the Stern Gang and the Irgun Zvai Leumi were driven to carry out such murderous attacks on British servicemen who were there to keep the peace and prevent a war breaking out between Jews and Arabs.

With the holocaust survivors clamouring to leave Europe, and the Arabs strongly opposed to any significant increase in the Jewish population, we soon realised that we were in the middle with the unenviable task of keeping the peace. Obviously it was an impossible situation and the fact that Britain gave up the Palestine Mandate in 1948 would suggest that the British policy on Palestine was flawed. However, one wonders what would have happened if they had done this in 1945. Were



Above: a train derailed by terrorists in 1946

Below left: an unnamed paratrooper, fetchingly attired

Below right: out and about in Tel Aviv

the Jews prepared for an all-out war with the Arabs and would they have achieved the military successes of 1948 if they had had to fight three years earlier?

Since being demobbed from the army I have continually followed the news from Palestine, always hoping for a solution which will enable both Jews and Arabs to live together in peace. So many times it has seemed that a solution was near and then the

cycle of violence resumes.

In November 1947 an advance party from the 3rd Battalion moved into Peninsular Barracks in Haifa, but as the previous battalion had not finished moving all their ammunition out of the armoury, our RQM instructed us to stack all our ammunition in the camp cinema, next door to the cookhouse. After carrying out such a busy and strenuous task I was soon fast asleep – that is, until I was rudely awakened by someone shaking me and saying ‘Sergeant! The cookhouse is on fire!’

I reported to the RSM who decided that the ammunition must be moved to safer place, but in the meantime three fire engines arrived from Haifa and started to hose the fire. After a while it became obvious that our temporary arsenal would soon be engulfed by the flames and we were all ordered to get as far away as we could. The firemen also tried to move the fire engines to a safer place but to their dismay the last

fire engine to arrive on the scene would not start and this meant that the others were trapped close to the blazing building.

Suddenly there was an enormous bang as the flames reached the ammunition and flames and sparks shot high into the air. In addition to rifle and pistol ammunition



there were plastic explosives, mines, grenades, mortar-bombs and Piat bombs, and boxes of these were blasted into the air. In the light of the fire you could see the boxes open and their content fall to the ground.

We all ran around the camp in a real panic, not knowing which direction to take and I found myself taking cover with someone else – to this day I don't know his name – under the shelter of one of the long wooden huts. When we had time to catch our breath we both realised



Left: Bill Watts on his 90th birthday

Below: Clearing mines

Bottom: putting out the fire at Peninsula Barracks

that this was the armoury in which the previous battalion's ammunition was still stored and then we really did panic running round the camp looking for a safer spot.

With each explosion more boxes

were blasted into the sky and the camp was filled with the clatter of exploding small arms fire and the larger bangs caused by exploding bombs and grenades. It was just like Guy Fawkes night except that most of the explosions were all around us on the ground and not in the sky. In the morning the camp looked a mess with large and small craters, where mortar bombs, Piat and grenades had exploded. Every building in the

camp had been badly damaged but surprisingly the only casualty was one private soldier who had been hit in the ankle by a piece of shrapnel.

Back home

After being demobbed in 1948 it took me four years to settle down to life in civvy street. During this period I went from job to job including sales clerk, machine operator, baker's roundsman, plumber's mate and Hoover salesman. Then, in 1952, I secured a job with a London firm of stockbrokers and this was the start of a City career which lasted for thirty-six years.

- Bill is on the look out for any surviving members of 3 PARA who served in Palestine between 1945 and 1948. Anyone reading this who is a 3 PARA veteran of Palestine or knows someone else who is can get in touch with Bill via his website – address below – or contact him through Pegasus at the following address: Pegasus Journal, RHQ PARA, Merville Barracks, Colchester CO2 7UT.

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