

Amidst an era of austerity, government is refashioning the Territorial Army as a greater reservist force, to bolster a condensed regular British Army. The pros and cons of this momentous shift will continue to be subject to great debate. Whilst the debate over defence expenditure is balanced between 'cake cutting and eating it', Soldier G hopes his recent experiences in basic reservist training recounted on the next page might afford perspective on policy for legislators:

'TSC (B) - Trained soldier course Bravo'

Arriving on a Friday evening at Pirbright, Army Training Centre, feelings lie between enthusiasm and apprehension. Delivered to the astute training team of Murphy troop, a steady stream of recruits arrive from their day jobs. Initial observations, we are an eclectic mix, reflecting civvy street. In contrast, the recruit mix, pooled decidedly among the Royal Corps of Signals, the Intelligence Corps, and the Royal Engineers speaks volumes about the trades attracting civvies to the reserves. Thankfully a few recruit Royal Artillery gunners have been thrown in for good measure, though one sole Royal Military Police – cue many impromptu jokes throughout course.

'Ging Gang Goolie'

Prior, all recruits have completed an initial 6 weekend preparatory stage of TSC, imaginatively named Alpha. NB, those able to do so have taken advantage of consolidated courses. Having juggled day jobs, in tandem with Alpha weekends, the consolidated two weeks Bravo stage with the regular army is most welcome. Murphy training team waste no time in teaching our troop the fundamentals and attributes that concern soldiering. We soon settle into the routine of a phase one training establishment. Marching from A to B becomes the norm, as does waddling like a braced penguin whilst passing staff. I enjoy our introduction to physical training; a concise tab - loaded march, in and around camp. PT instructors kindly offer imaginative words of encouragement whilst taking the opportunity to flex large biceps...inspiring to see female instructors take the lead.

'En garde'

The next few days follow a lively programme, from Counter-IED to map reading, through to Battle Casualty Drills and CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear). We also have a good opportunity to get to grips with skill at arms on the ranges. The summative test, a measured grouping of three to five rounds on target, rounds up the day nicely. With ammunition spent, we have the opportunity to fix bayonets and learn the 'buggar, we're all out of ammo' drill. A good measure of crawling around on belt buckles preceded a cold steel charge at static targets. This gunner successfully outwitted his target.

'Gas, gas, gas'

The theme of practical lessons continues and we are treated to a session in the gas chamber. However, with apparent negative connotations, we now enter what is termed the gas respirator testing facility. In keeping with great British tradition, we queue in a polite, orderly fashion by the facility, respirators and boiler suits donned. As our group enters, this author wins his bet, but is disappointed that his cell mate was unable to complete one line of Louis Armstrong's "what a wonderful world," - a fine, full bodied jazz vocal is most inaudible amid a fit of spluttering lung full's of CS gas. Each individual takes turn to remove respirator, complete the drill of name, rank and number and is ushered outside for cream teas. Readers note, we are treated to final CS session later in the course to complete CRBN decontamination drills and such like.

'Exercise Final fling'

Mid course, we all head off for a 'camping holiday' courtesy of Sandhurst training grounds. Think Butlins holiday resort but with porta-loos, do-it-yourself dig a hole sit down sessions and flannel- wash-and-go ablutions. Cutting to the chase, we dig shell scrapes, learn to how to patrol and navigate. A member of staff, endearingly named 'the general', coaches us during field Counter-IED lessons; words simply cannot convey the worth of this insight, hard earned in Afghanistan. We gain an appreciation of how war is an apparent game of cat and mouse, fought principally with 'the mark one eyeball' and man's best friend. The CO of Pirbright offers up his Easter Sunday to visit us in the field. A no-nonsense discussion is a worthy substitute for Easter eggs, as is the recognition conveyed for reservists' commitment alongside day jobs. How to drive recruitment and perhaps more importantly, how to retain personnel, is an apt discussion for our shell scrape. A fire and manoeuvre and a collective 'bug out' (tactical withdrawal) from our scrapes concludes our final field test.

'Left, right...left?'

We return to the comparative comfort of 'Hotel Pirbright'. Awaiting access to ablutions, I'm looking rougher than Nigel Farage post-election 'drinky poos'...On the theme of greasiness, we clean our 'easily accessible' SA80 L85A2 rifles and Corporal 'No comms, no bombs' carefully concludes with a summative approved 'clean and gleaming'. The subsequent days of summative assessments of MATTS - "military annual training tests," conclude CBRN, Battle Casualty Drills and map reading. Cat amongst pigeons, Army Initial Training Group pay us a surprise – 'don't panic' visit. Hats off, they are eager to understand how to drive and retain reservist recruitment. During lunch I suggest a tête-à-tête interview in a British Armed Forces recruitment office is perhaps preferable to 'apply-on-line' approach to recruitment. I've also become pre-occupied by the first rate, canteen curry and chips.

Accelerating towards course completion, MATTS are intersected with drill practice in readiness for the pass out parade. This gunner proudly grasps the concept of 'left', followed by 'right', and using premonition places his left forward again. This is seemingly an alien concept for unfortunate fellows among us – and no, they were not gunners. On practice parade Corporal 'No comms, no bombs' offers kind words of encouragement - curiously, as he follows up the rear, bearing rifle and bayonet, we get in step.

Fortunately, on the final day, the marching band offers rhythm to the stragglers and we keep in step as we follow case-hardened, 14 week regular recruits to the parade square. As we stand still, the guest speaker encapsulates the wider narrative alluded to by the great and the good at Pirbright and beyond - with critical reflection, we now enter a unique contract with the nation, under the ownership of policy makers.

When put out to military tender, Gunner G hopes a contract, bound by integrity, is reciprocated in the political realm.