

The Birth and Early Years
of 2 Troop 300 Airborne Squadron RE
The Edinburgh Troop
By D.H. Thomas former Troop Commander

When the TA was reformed after the war, the planners in Whitehall created 16 Airborne Division commanded by General Roy Urquhart (Ex Arnhem).

One of the units of the new Div. RE. was 300 Airborne Squadron, which, after an initial flirtation with Liverpool, ended up based in Glasgow. There was a rumour that the legendary Col. Alastair Pearson DSO (x4) had a hand in this arrangement. Those aware of the Edinburgh v Glasgow factor will realise that Edinburgh felt sidelined by the fact that no Airborne unit had been allocated to the City. This situation called for the exercise of the traditional Airborne initiative!

300 Sqn. was commanded by Peter Dixon (Ex 6 Div) who lived in Edinburgh. I also lived in Edinburgh (Ex 6 Div & later 9Sqn.), as did R. Barr (Ex 6 Div).

The Edinburgh TA Association was sounded out and they were quite enthusiastic about having an Airborne TA unit in the City. They offered to provide the necessary finance and the appropriate accommodation.

Armed with this support, Peter Dixon went ahead and unilaterally transferred 2 Troop of 300 Sqn. from Glasgow to Edinburgh. The launch team comprised P W Dixon (Sqn. OC), D H Thomas Troop (OC), and R Barr (Troop Sgt). The new unit was based at the Drill Hall in York Place.

The Troop was soon flooded with recruits. They included a number of students from the university, and likewise of bus drivers from the City Transport Dept. There were soon a stream travelling south to Abingdon in Oxfordshire for their two-week para courses, returning proudly sporting their new wings.

Then trouble struck!. The Edinburgh evening paper started printing the odd article about the Troop activities. Eventually higher authority, in the form of H.Q. Scottish Command became aware of this unauthorised unit on its doorstep.

Peter Dixon was ordered to report to GOC Scottish Command at the Castle to explain what was going on at York Place. The General gave him a rough time, telling him in no uncertain terms that no such unit had been authorised by Whitehall and therefore did not exist!. Peter responded by assuring him that the unit certainly did exist, and to prove it he would parade all 50 members, many of them already trained parachutists, on the Castle Esplanade, for the General to see for himself. He said that he could not guarantee that the press would not turn up, and that there might be minor chaos in the City bus services seeing the number of drivers who would be on this parade.

So the result was game set and match. The General was a big enough man to accept that he was out-flanked, and ended up giving his approval, and undertaking to lean on Whitehall to have the unit regularised.

Thereafter the unit continued to prosper. A para training balloon with crew was enticed up to Edinburgh for a weekend. Large turnout of parents and girlfriends assembled at Balerno SW of Edinburgh to see their line-shooting loved ones proving that they actually had earned those wings.

The Troop was soon up to establishment.

Most of the student members had to join up to do their National Service after finishing at university, and several found their way into the regular 9 Sqn. One even extended his service, got a commissioned, and returned as a Troop officer.

Whilst the unit was now fully legitimate it still had the odd problem with higher authority!.

Training in the handling of explosives in a drill hall is not particularly interesting, so when the Troop was approached by the owner of a derelict mansion in the borders who wanted the building demolished this seemed a perfect answer. Then other owners followed, leading to a series of very popular weekend training jaunts. The owners were very appreciative and contributed generously to unit funds, which covered drinks all round for the whole weekend. However, these activities led to complaints from local demolition contractors, and higher authority stepped in and banned such "training exercises".

There were many amusing incidents in the early years, including that of the piper taken down to the first Regimental Annual Camp. The CRE had agreed that he should replace the traditional bugler. However, he was nearly lynched by the less enlightened members from south of the border when playing "Reveille" on the first morning, and had to take refuge in the guard room. A compromise was reached when his pitch was moved several hundred yards from the tent lines, and thereafter peace reigned.

It is very fitting that the 2 Troop which grew out of an eventful but interesting beginning should live on as the foundation of the Edinburgh Branch (now Scottish Branch) of the Airborne Engineers Association.