

A portrait of an elderly man with white hair, wearing a green zip-up jacket over a striped shirt. He has four medals pinned to his left chest. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with trees and a cloudy sky.

BELFAST

1973

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"I DID NOT LIKE THE
LOOK OF IT... WAS
IT AN AMBUSH?"

In July 1973 I was a Corporal in the Royal Corps of Transport based in Belfast. This story is not particularly about me but about members of a different Corps that is very

rarely mentioned in the *Legion* magazine – the Army Catering Corps or ACC. Let's start by getting the jokes out of the way... ACC stands for the Aldershot Concrete Company/what is the hardest course in the Army? The cooks' course, because no one has ever passed it.

Normally we were stationed in Germany and had ACC cooks attached to us; they ran the Regimental kitchen, or cookhouse as it was known then. When we were deployed on exercise, or on operations like the tour in Belfast, some of these cooks accompanied us to provide food – a very important job.

The squadron I was with was deployed throughout Belfast in small detachments driving armoured 'Saracens' and Humber 'Pigs'

Below: the Royal Corps of Transport 'stable belt', worn when in barracks, and David's General Service Northern Ireland, United Nations (for service in the Sudan), Queen's Golden Jubilee Police Long Service and Good Conduct medals


for the infantry units that were deployed throughout the city at the time. It was summer and I was in what they called Moscow Camp; it was late afternoon, getting on for early evening. In all parts of the city, trouble was brewing; there were numerous 'contacts' and a fair bit of rioting going on, and nearly all units were committed.

I was called to the Squadron HQ and the Officer Commanding, a Major, told me there was a prisoner to be transported from a patrol base in the north of the city. He told me to find a vehicle and an escort, then go and collect the prisoner. Easier said than done on an evening like that one, because the camp was almost deserted with everyone committed. After scouring the base, I found a 'Pig' and a RCT Driver who was available – the next problem being the escort, a pair of soldiers to ride 'shotgun' with us. There just was absolutely no one about. Then I had a light-bulb moment and headed towards the cooks' accommodation, where I found two cooks who had just finished their shift in the camp kitchen. The cooks rarely left the camp; their job was very important, staying put to provide hot food for the guys working long hours under pressure. They looked a bit taken by surprise when I turned up.

I told them what I had been tasked to do and how I needed their help. They agreed, so I told them to get their combats and flak jackets on, and draw their rifles from the armoury, which they did. We left Moscow Camp and headed to the north of the city; I cannot remember now where we were going exactly, but I think it was a school building the Army had taken over. It was early evening by now and still light, it being summertime. The city seemed silent and deserted, but you could smell or sense trouble in the air. Somewhere over the city a huge plume of black smoke was rising high into the still air.

Inside the 'Pig' I sat in the front passenger seat next to the driver, with the two cooks in the back, the rear doors closed and >>





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observation hatches open. We did not have a radio because there were none available – it was not uncommon in those days not to have one. We reached the school without incident and collected the prisoner; by the time we headed back, it was dark. The first route we took I could see the road was blocked with hijacked abandoned vehicles; there was no one around. Stopping a few hundred yards away, I did not like the look of it: was it an ambush? So I ordered the driver to turn around. Our job was to bring the prisoner back, not to engage in a fight – and without a radio we could not expect any help; we would have to sort it out ourselves.

The next route we took, the road was blocked with burning vehicles. The street lights weren't working, and the glow of the flames lit up the front of the houses on either side of the road, casting shadows on it – and I could see people darting about occasionally, their faces stood out, illuminated by the bright flames. Next came a hail of missiles... We backed off; I could hear the two cooks in the back cock their rifles. That was good; it meant they were switched on. We tried a couple more routes but each one was blocked and we had to turn back. I was rapidly running out of ideas.

We decided to make our way through some back streets off the main routes, some were not lit, some poorly lit, but all of them were deserted. In view of what we had seen and encountered up to that point, we were on edge and alert to anything. We ploughed on at a steady pace, knowing we were in a

Above: A 'Pig' on the streets of Belfast.
Below: Corporal David Sismey, left, at another base

bad position if things went wrong. After some very tense minutes we emerged on a main, well-lit thoroughfare, and made our way back to camp without incident. It seemed to have taken us hours to get back.

It was a long time ago now and I cannot remember the names of the cooks who came with me. But they were willing hands and stepped up to the mark when asked, and I think they enjoyed their adventure. I also think, looking back more than 40 years later, that at the age of 22 I was responsible for the patrol, the personnel, the prisoner and the vehicle in dangerous circumstances. People tend to forget how young our Service personnel are, and the responsibilities they have to carry. Fortunately things turned out OK for us that night. ●

