

NATIONAL SERVICE 50 YEARS ON

Berwick Coates

'Bring back National Service.'

How often does one hear that heartfelt plea as a cure for the apparently permanent epidemic of jobs, hoodies, louts, hooligans, delinquents, and general undesirables, yet one wonders whether the pleader really has any idea of what he or she is asking for.

National Service came to an end fifty years ago - the last National Serviceman was demobbed in May 1963 - so you have to be nearly seventy to know what you are talking about - which cuts out the majority of the population.

So what was National Service? How did it start? How long did it last? What did you actually have to do? Who had to do it? Was it really as awful as all that? Or was it in fact worse? Why did it come to an end? What good did it do - if any?

This profusely-illustrated book takes you behind the scenes of the 'system' which created National Service, and analyses the effects it had on two and a half million young men who were given no choice about giving up two years of their lives to the Armed Forces.

This fascinating and richly nostalgic book will provide insights into National Service for those too young to have experienced it and will bring a host of memories for those who went through the apparently endless round of square-bashing and spitting-and-polishing, sometimes with endurance and surprisingly often with enjoyment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

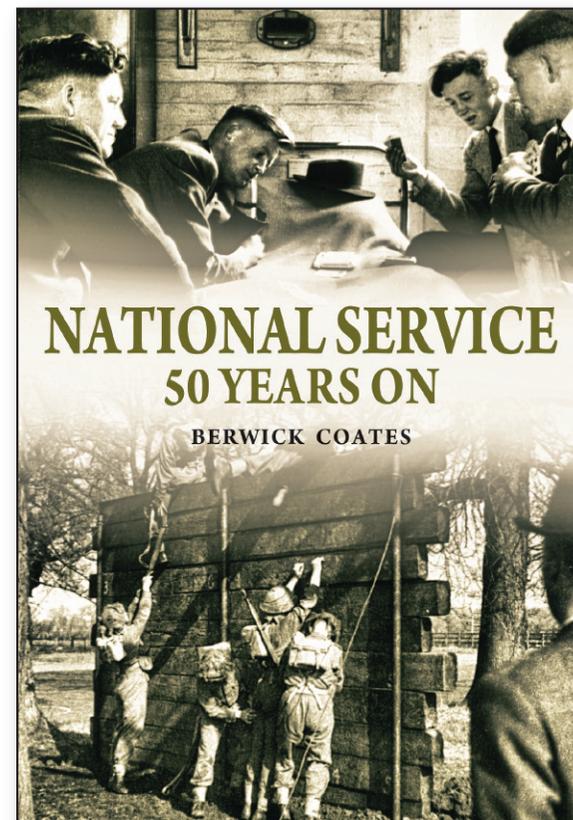
Berwick Coates was educated at Kingston Grammar School, and read History at Christ's College, Cambridge. Since then, he has been at various times an Army officer; writer; artist; lecturer; careers adviser; games coach, and teacher of History, English, Latin, General Studies, and Swahili. He lives in the West Country, where he works as a school archivist. His written work includes biography, text books, general history, local history, memoirs, humour, and light verse. This is his tenth book. His first historical novel will be published next year by Simon and Schuster.

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Learning to wear uniform. Mastering the precise position of the cap badge – one inch over the left eye – and trying the unromantic, square-ended woollen tie.

The Services took its sport very seriously. Games which had been arranged were to be played regardless of the weather – in this case arctic. Competitions, cups, and medals were continual.



No Army training unit was complete without its assault course, and this was part of it – the fearsome ten-foot wall. Note the obligatory trilby hat for the cadet spectator in civilian dress.

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The Army usually lived in barracks; the RAF seemed always to live in huts.



Note the washing equipment stowed on top of the lockers, the inescapable (but necessary) iron holder, and the precisely arranged benches – all just like the Army.

CHAPTER 7
New Boys

A barrack room was pretty much what you would expect. It was long, it needed to be, it had to accommodate anything from eighteen to thirty or more. It was usually tall, especially if it was one of those built to house troops just home from the Zulu War; ceilings were always so high then. Walls were usually done out in some kind of rock cake yellow or mossy-chestnut green. Lights hung from anorexic flies, with the barest of fringing in the way of shades. Windows were large, single-glazed, with hagg panes designed to conduct the maximum of cold air from outside. Soft furnishings were the stuff of horsehair recruits' dreams.

The floor was bare boards, which echoed constantly with the impact of booted feet, often hobnailed booted feet. In the middle of the room – if you were lucky – there stood a venerable iron stove, which took a good deal of engineering skill to motivate. Coal supply could at times be as capricious as that suffered by Bob Cratchit. When firing on all cylinders, this temperamental device could generate a scorching amount of heat, but only to those quite near. Move away to avoid being consumed, and, on winter evenings, you entered the Arctic tundra.

Beds were, predictably, made of iron. Mattresses were plain, but adequate. Contrary to many woe-ridden expectations, sheets and pillow cases were provided, and everybody was soon to be issued with two pairs of pyjamas – quite warm ones actually. Routine issue was two or three dreary grey blankets, plus another, slightly more personable one in Land-Rover green. For some impenetrable reason, this was known as the 'best' blanket, presumably because of its fleecing top.

Between each pair of beds was a locker, lockable, for a recruit's clothes and other personal items. If he was lucky, he might also get a box to put under his bed. This cubic capacity was expected to cater for the whole of a soldier's wardrobe, both military and civilian (though he was usually forbidden to wear 'civilian' until well into his training period, if then). Any other possessions had to go in the locker or the box. That was the recruit's entire 'personal space'. He was expected to keep these two receptacles in good order and cleanliness (ironic, isn't it). He was also responsible for the area around and under his bed – what the Army termed his 'bed space'. It was as if the total area of the barrack room had been divided exactly by the number of inhabitants, and the answer was your 'bed space'. (None of the latter, too.)

Toilets and washing facilities were in another room. As one might expect with such facilities constantly used by countless successions of inmates, none of whom was anxious to make them their home, or to stay long in its freezing confines, enamel was chipped, wall dispenser was broken and flaky; iron or lead pipes bulged out of walls everywhere; and nobody ever saw a plug present on the end of its chain.

Again, to be fair to the Army, they did in time build some more modern barracks, and facilities in them were more civilised (central heating, for example), but the abiding memory of thousands of recruits will be, I suspect, what I have described.

A new arrival, then, deposited his bag on the first empty or the most likely-looking bed he came across, looked about him, tried to stop his heart sinking, and set about making the acquaintance of those who were already there.

Example of a double-page spread.



Postings abroad usually involved some serious soldiering.