

## Conflict remembered: As a new book charts the course of a largely-forgotten war on terror, Steve Snelling

There was a certain inevitability about the course our conversation was taking as we ventured into painful territory. It was as though all memory lanes led back to the Troodos mountains and a scorchingly hot day in June 1956 when a British war on terror took on a terrifying new meaning for scattered squads of young Norfolk conscripts caught up in the so-called Cyprus Emergency.

Brian Wright has a hauntingly vivid recall of the moment a forest fire turned a guerilla hunt into a frenzied struggle for survival.

"My wife will tell you," he says, "I still get nightmares about it all these years on. Even now, I can't stand the smell of barbecues. It brings it all back..."

In all, 20 British soldiers, including five Royal Norfolk National Servicemen, died when the tinder-dry and tree-smothered hills caught fire at the height of Operation Lucky Alphonse, or 'Unlucky Alphonse' as it was quickly dubbed.

Designed to root out and capture the notorious Colonel George Grivas and his terrorist groups, who were hell-bent on ending British rule and forging political union with Greece, the counter-insurgency sweep was all but overwhelmed by the tragic inferno that left deep psychological scars which, in some cases, have been slow to heal.

Even among those Norfolk veterans not directly involved in the blaze the disastrous episode has endured as an abiding recollection of loss and sacrifice.

As John Mitchell put it: "To lose five like that really brought it home to us. One of those who died was in the same intake as me and I'd shared a tent with a couple of them. It was a bad business all right..."

Memories of the Troodos tragedy that marred an otherwise largely successful campaign waged by the 1st Royal Norfolks during its 13-month tour have been stirred by a searching new study of the four-year struggle and the subsequent Turkish invasion that has left the Mediterranean island divided to this day.

The Cyprus Emergency charts a remarkable, if strangely familiar, story of how ill-prepared and under-resourced British troops, many of them teenage conscripts barely out of basic training, took on and eventually defeated Colonel Grivas's EOKA guerillas during the 'rock 'n' roll' Fifties.

It is a compelling saga of a conflict characterised by moments of horror, humour and no little heroism that has been largely forgotten but which ex-soldier turned military historian Nick van der Bijl believes deserve wider recognition.

"Most people today think of Cyprus as a holiday playground, a place to relax and unwind in the Mediterranean sunshine, but it was a different story for all those National Servicemen who found themselves initially pitched into a guerilla war with absolutely no intelligence and the wrong equipment," says van der Bijl.

"It was a case of having to learn fast. It was the first domestic terrorist campaign of its kind fought by the British Army. They had to adjust to a new warfare, but once the tactics were developed, and the right equipment brought in, the casualties dropped markedly, morale rose and they were able to crack on."

Van der Bijl maintains that experience gained, sometimes painfully, in Cyprus was later put to good use in Northern Ireland and helped lay the foundations for British military tactics in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"What is clear," he adds, "is that without a shadow of a doubt EOKA was militarily defeated, just as the IRA was militarily defeated and politically ruined."

Such certainties, however, were less apparent at the time to the young Royal Norfolks, many of them reluctant soldiers plucked from better-paid jobs to serve Queen and Country in a struggle few entirely understood against a ruthless enemy that defied easy recognition.

Hurriedly air-lifted into Cyprus in the autumn of 1955 to reinforce a beleaguered colonial police force struggling to contend with increasingly disruptive riots and a murderous wave of terrorist attacks, the new recruits, many of whom were aged less than 20 and had



# Horrors and heroism of you

never gone abroad before, grew up fast.

Among them was Brian Wright from West Acre, near Swaffham, who, having had his five-year joinery apprenticeship rudely interrupted, found himself despatched to the Mediterranean isle as an assault pioneer.

"There was so much politics involved," he recalls, "it was hard to grasp what it was all about, but I'll always remember my father telling me I went away a boy and came home a man."

According to Brian Beckett it was simply a case of "trying to make the best of it".

"I'm not sure we knew what to expect," he says, "but we were all in the same boat and it was a matter of doing the best you could."

Having created some semblance of order out of apparent chaos and established a base camp close to the Cyprus Broadcasting Station, the Norfolk soldiers quickly discovered the realities of Emergency life. Tasked mainly with mundane internal security duties, they settled into a routine of curfews, patrols and searches while also policing demonstrations

and protecting remote and vulnerable public utility installations. And always they had to guard against the twin enemies of boredom and a clandestine foe who regarded them as legitimate targets. Not for nothing did a stretch of old Nicosia acquire the nickname 'Murder Mile'.

"Strange as it might seem," recalls Brian Beckett, "I don't remember worrying too much. Whether you were putting up a sandbag emplacement in Metaxas Square or patrolling the streets, you just got on with it. Everything was new to me. I'd never been out of the country, never slept in a tent before and certainly never thought I'd be doing anything like fighting terrorists."

"We were just taught to be as observant and careful as we could for our own safety and to do our best for the regiment. But, to be honest, you couldn't tell a Turk from a Greek, let alone know who was a terrorist."

Once while patrolling near a sub-station in Limassol, he recalls a bomb being thrown round a street corner.

"Luckily," says Brian, "no one was injured. You just accepted it as part and parcel of your job."

John Denny was struck by how quickly the young conscripts adapted to their role with all its inherent hazards. A regular and a veteran of the Korean war, he was a company sergeant major in Cyprus and recalls: "The National Servicemen were fantastic. They all pulled on the same rope as it were. There was a great spirit. We rallied together and there were no weak links."

"In fact, the young NCOs in particular responded really well to all the challenges and the responsibilities of being given detached duties. And you have to remember there was a certain excitement about it all."

Brian Beckett agrees.

"It was good to get away from all the 'bull' that you had back in England," he says. "It was a bit of an adventure and you never thought anything would happen to you."

In any case, there were diversions from patrolling and combating mobs of stone-

# talks to Norfolk veterans about their psychological scars after the tragedies of the Cyprus Emergency



'The flames were shooting straight up and trees were exploding in the heat. Down below you could hear our blokes. They were just running for their lives, but they couldn't run fast enough. The fire was too quick for them...'



**Far left, Brian Wright was a young National Serviceman caught up in the Troodos mountains forest blaze in Cyprus in 1956 in which 20 British soldiers, including five Royal Norfolk National Servicemen, died. Left and inset left, Brian Beckett was another Royal Norfolk called into action in the Cyprus Emergency. Above, the memorial panel to Royal Norfolk Regiment soldiers killed during the Cyprus Emergency 1955-59 is presented to Gen Jack Dye, right, by Keith Rackham at the Royal Norfolk Regimental Museum in Norwich last year.**

## ng Norfolks far from home

throwing youngsters.

"My abiding memory of my time in Cyprus is swimming," says John Mitchell. "I suppose there might have been 5pc of the battalion who could swim before they came to Cyprus and 95pc by the time we left. Even I learned to swim in Limassol docks and I didn't like water.

"The Cypriots tended to have a siesta in the afternoons which meant there wasn't a lot of trouble then, so we could all go down to the beach and swim."

Such breaks, however, were not entirely without risk. Buried bombs and mines were a constant danger and regular checks were made, one of which resulted in a lucky escape for Brian Wright. He had moved barely 30 yards from a suspected hidden device when it exploded.

"It was the strangest of feelings," he recalls. "We were lifted completely off our feet by the blast, but were uninjured."

Two more Norfolks were less fortunate when their truck ran over a landmine, killing them instantly. But, ironically, the biggest single loss

of life in the battalion came not at the hands of terrorists but from a forest blaze almost certainly ignited by so-called 'friendly fire'.

It occurred during Operation Lucky Alphonse, a large-scale sweep involving hundreds of British soldiers, including four companies of the Royal Norfolks, designed to cut off and capture the 'most wanted' terrorist on the island, George Grivas.

A cordon spanning 75 miles round the thickly-wooded, sheer-sided gullies and ravines of a tract of Troodos mountains was established and for more than a week in June, 1956, parties of soldiers sweated and toiled as they combed mile after mile of rocky, sun-baked hillsides in a vain search for EOKA hideouts.

Frustrated by the lack of success, mortars were used in a misguided attempt to flush out the terrorists. The result was disastrous. Fires broke out in the parched Paphos forest which were fanned, the following day, by a strong wind.

In no time, a firestorm was racing across the hills at a speed of 30mph, trapping troops and

trucks as it destroyed everything in its path.

Brian Wright was a helpless spectator to the conflagration.

"It was terrible," he says. "I was just above it. The wind got up and it sounded just like an express train rushing up through this ravine. The flames were shooting straight up and trees were exploding in the heat.

"Down below you could hear our blokes. They were just running for their lives, but they couldn't run fast enough. The fire was too quick for them."

Amid the horror, however, there were remarkable acts of heroism. Most notable among them were the selfless actions of the Royal Norfolks' medical officer, himself a National Serviceman.

Now in his 80s, Dr Grahame Sutton is modest about his tireless life-saving efforts which were carried out despite having suffered second-degree burns to his left arm.

"If your brain works at all, it works in very high speed in those operations," he says. "In something like that, you are faced with a live-

or-die emergency and it either clicks into gear and you get out of it or you don't."

Cut-off by the fire, he and a small party of orderlies abandoned their Land Rover to the flames and sheltered on a rocky shale bank while the blaze roared either side of them.

"There was a sheet of flame... and we put heads to the middle and backs to the fire and just about managed to survive. It seemed to take ages to go over us, but it did," he recalls.

So intense was the heat it melted the steering wheel of their vehicle and set ammunition off.

The water having been sucked out of them, they drank hungrily from a mountain stream before setting off in search of survivors in need of first aid. It turned out to be a harrowing journey.

"I found some soldiers who had gone up a tree to try and get away from the flames and all that remained of one or two of those was their webbing belts which was really rather frightening. It was not very nice actually. Then we found some burned people and did what we could for them with the small amount of stuff I had in the haversack round my neck..."

All told, he reckons he was able to treat roughly half a dozen survivors.

"The others had either escaped the fire or they'd perished," he adds.

His work, however, in that charred and choking wilderness where the risk of more fires was ever-present was not over.

"The fire happened in the morning and I was still in the forest in the middle of the afternoon. I thought, 'God, am I ever going to get out of this place'. It took a long time to find out which units and how many we'd lost, added to which was the extreme heat which meant you could only walk about, you couldn't run."

Five months later, when the battalion was en route back to Britain, Grahame Sutton would learn, somewhat to his surprise, that his courage had been recognised with an award of the MBE.

By then, the Emergency still had more than two years to run, but the tide was already turning away from EOKA. Security had been tightened and the fight taken to the terrorists. But how do the Norfolk veterans who helped pave the way to eventual victory look back on a conflict most have long since forgotten if they knew it took place at all?

John Denny believes the battalion acquitted itself well.

"We did what we had to do in very competent fashion," he says. "Of course, we didn't solve the problem of EOKA. We were simply a part of the process. We just plodded around and did our best."

Brian Beckett concurs. "I certainly wasn't bitter about it. I think we did a good job and I certainly experienced a special sort of camaraderie that I wouldn't have known otherwise."

Most, like Brian Wright, John Mitchell and all the other young conscripts, eventually completed their time and resumed their old lives. Brian returned to his apprenticeship and married the girl he'd got engaged to before heading out to Cyprus, but memories of that conflict in the Mediterranean more than half a century ago still loom large.

A few weeks ago, he represented the battalion at a poignant ceremony when an Elizabeth Cross was presented to the family of his close friend, Keith Haylock, one of the five Royal Norfolks to die in the Troodos fire, the oldest of whom was just 20.

"Others may have forgotten what happened, but I'll never forget," says Brian. "I was so lucky. Had I been a little further down the hillside or a little closer to where that bomb went off on the beach I wouldn't be talking to you now."

**For the full story see the EDP Sunday supplement in tomorrow's EDP. A gathering of Royal Norfolk veterans of the Cyprus Emergency is taking place at North Elmham village hall on April 30, from 7pm. Anyone who served in the battalion during its tour of the island is welcome. For more information telephone John Mitchell on 01328 701342. The Cyprus Emergency: The Divided Island 1955-1974, by Nick van der Bijl, is**

