

BOY SOLDIERS

National Service ended fifty years ago this month. Four former conscripts who were called up as boys tell **Monica Porter** how the experience affected their lives and shaped their values as men. Portraits by **Paul Stuart**

TROUBLE WAS BY NO MEANS OVER after the end of the Second World War. Britain needed to keep a fighting force to deal with situations such as the Malayan Emergency, Cyprus, Suez and the Korean War - let alone post-war occupation duties in Germany and Japan and the need to maintain a presence in the shrinking Empire.

Accordingly, between 1946 and 1960, more than two million men aged between 17 and 21 were conscripted, trained and frequently posted overseas for up to two years: the great majority serving in the Army and the RAE. The rules were that only those who worked for a minimum of eight years in one of the three "essential" services - coal mining, fanning and the merchant navy - were exempt.

For most, it was a real shock to the system. Not only had they never been away from their homes and families, but they were suddenly subjected to harsh discipline, rough living conditions, and often mortal danger. And yet, it's rare to meet an ex-National Serviceman who regrets the experience. On the contrary, it enabled them to see the world at a time when few could travel abroad, and most feel it was "the making of them", bringing out their best qualities and bringing lifelong friendships and treasured memories.

Genuine conviction or making the most of it? To commemorate the end of conscription - 50 years ago, on December 31, 1960 - four veterans recall their days in uniform and explain their enduring significance.

PETER JACKSON

Home town: Bristol

Period served: 1956-58

Served with: 2nd Tactical Air Force, 755 and 477 Signals Units, RAF

Posting: Germany

Occupation after demob: Librarian



When I was called up, aged 18, I chose the RAF instead of the Army because I'd been in the air cadets at school. I did basic training at RAF Hednesford in Staffordshire, a savage place where you got shouted at a lot, followed by 12 weeks of "trade training" at RAF Hereford, where I learnt to be a clerk/typist.

Afterwards I was posted to Hambühren in Northern Germany - a small RAF station engaged in signals intelligence gathering. This meant intercepting radio messages from the Eastern Bloc. Wireless operators listened to Morse Code signals and linguists eavesdropped on verbal exchanges in Russian and other Eastern European languages. We all signed the Official Secrets Act.

Each day as the intercept reports came in, I sent them with an armed escort to GCHQ in Cheltenham. Real Cold War stuff. We all took Khrushchev's scaremongering seriously and the Russians were not far away. The Hungarian Revolution erupted and for a while we thought there might be Nato intervention. In 1957 I was transferred to another base near Cologne.

We had central heating and double-glazing - a luxurious change from the stark wooden huts we were billeted in back home. The local civilians in the British Zone were very friendly.

At the time, we regarded National Service as an intrusion. We wanted to get it over and done with, but today we're jolly glad we did it and feel sorry for those who missed out. It taught us valuable lessons, such as self-reliance and the importance of comradeship. ►