

Fact File

The 15-day exercise on the army's training ground of Sennelager near Hannover was called Able Condor. More than 820 troops attended with 600 vehicles and trailers which would stretch for 30 miles in convoy

The three regiments on the exercise included the 36th (Eastern) Signal Regiment (Volunteers) which is made up of three squadrons and an HQ in Ilford. One of those three squadrons is the 44 (Cinque Ports) Signal Squadron (Volunteers) — the Southend troop and two troops from Grays

Each day T.A. troops work they are paid the same as soldiers of equivalent rank in the regular army

GERMAN EXERCISE PROVES TERRITORIAL ARMY RESERVES ARE A

Weekend troopers tested to the limit

TO anyone who thinks the Territorial Army is all dressing up and playing at soldiers — think again.

I spent a weekend with the Southend and Grays troops from the 36 (Eastern) Signal Regiment (Volunteers) on a training exercise in Germany and had all my preconceptions blown right out of the water.

These men and women learn to soldier for real, right down to the fitness tests and the weapons they must learn to clean and shoot.

They also train for trades that are often a world away from their daytime jobs and in the signal regiment can become trained systems operators.

My weekend began touring camps with the officers, but on the Sunday I was dropped off at the base of the Southend troop — a rat and fly infested barn on a German hillside in the middle of a mini-heatwave.

The guys had set up a radio communication system with a mast which allowed them to speak to other camps several miles away. They were hot and tired as this was their fifth or sixth base in a week and sleep was at a premium.

Some were looking forward to an early night while others were swatting away flies and gnats as they tried to grab some rest on their camp beds before taking their turn on watch.

There was a moment of panic when someone spotted the troop leader with a gas mask. Everyone expected

to hear a whistle — the signal for a gas drill and be forced to don their heavy contamination suits and masks.

But the panic was over when one bright spark saw the newspaper in his hand. He was just going to use the famous portable loos demanded by German environmental laws. Anyone who has been to music festivals will understand the need for the mask!

The night began to cool as we

tucked into chicken pie and potatoes cooked in a portable oven and we knocked back cold drinks in a bid to keep dehydration at bay.

The heat was just unbearable and the following storm seemed almost inevitable. Soon, the farm was lit up by flashes of sheet lightning.

Then came the phone call. New orders, we had to be ready to pull out and move to a new location at 3am.

Despite their exhaustion everyone remained good humoured. It took just over an hour to take down the masts, (being wary of the lightning) pack the vans, clear the site and the troop's five vehicles were soon on the road.

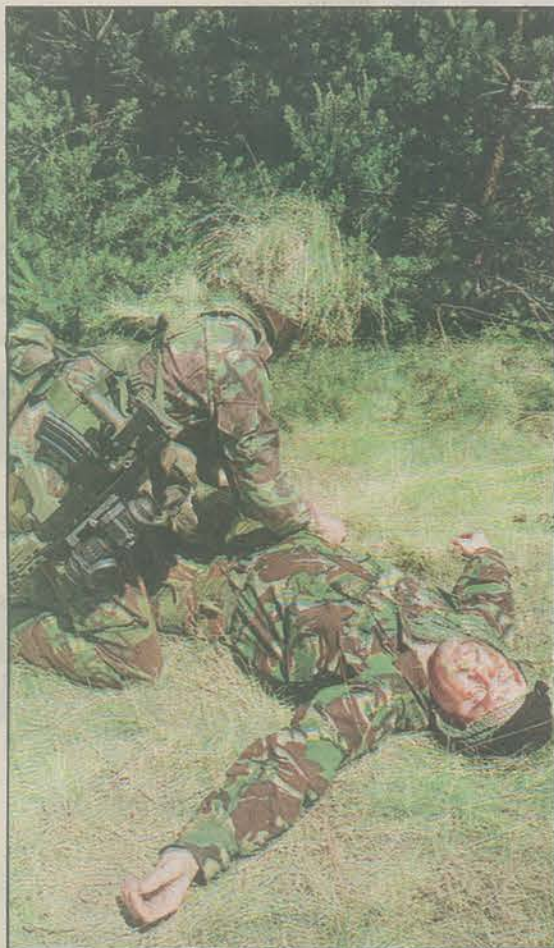
I was worn out. I lay in the back of the Land Rover, open to the elements and watched the storm lash the sky.

We pulled into the new site about 5am and the troop's army training came into its own. Within half an hour the vehicles were camouflaged, the tents erected and the camp beds out.

The army-issue sleeping bag was heavenly soft and warm and I wearily snuggled down. I couldn't wait, sleep at last. I rested my cheek on the padded hood and sighed. Just my luck, the guy next to me was snoring like a trooper!



TERRITORIAL Army troops from Southend and Grays were back at work today after an exercise in Germany. LINDA CHRISTIE flew out to join them and find out more about life in the "Terriers"



'HAVE altar will travel' is David Eaton's motto in his role as padre of the signal regiment.

The Rev Eaton was recruited at an officers' Christmas dinner several years ago. He explained: "They got me slightly squiffy and suddenly I was in."

But it is a decision he has never regretted and even though some of his parishioners since it slightly "odd" he gets enormous pleasure from being in the T.A.

David, 39, priest-in-charge of All Saints with St Chad's in Vange, explained: "I have

jumped out of helicopters and met the Queen and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

"I have even taken a service on the North Sea in a ship's cinema — I was on after the dog film Beethoven."

Sadder moments have included attending the bed-sides of seriously injured officers.

David, who wears a captain's uniform but doesn't carry a weapon, said: "One of the questions I'm asked is how can I be a vicar and go to war? The chaplain in the army is a symbol that war is failure, failure that humans

haven't been able to reconcile their differences without beating the hell out of each other.

"And I don't see how I can live in a democracy and expect other people to fight battles for me — to me that is immoral."

David's role involves keeping an ear to the ground to pass on any problems to the commanding officers.

And he provides a comforting arm for troops who may want to talk about anything from relationship problems to doubts about faith.

He said: "When you are on

top of a mountain together and it's pouring with rain it's amazing how people will open up and share confidences."

It was his fourth trip to Germany and he has become a real pro at touring the camps to say mass with a portable altar.

The light-hearted tone of his services have made him extremely popular and I had to stifle my giggles when I spotted the joke on the mass sheet about the priest who needed to be helped into his army surplice!

■ Fallen enemy — Soldiers must check for any booby traps, left

Pictures: LINDA CHRISTIE



■ Army padre — David Eaton, left, gives a service to the troops

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■ In communication — microbiologist Paul Whitehouse is an officer in the Territorial Army 98/4026/4

Officer and a gentleman

BY day Paul Whitehouse's job as a food microbiologist means hygiene is a priority but come the weekend he just loves to get dirty. Paul, 27, who lives in Grays, toyed with the idea of joining the army when he left Leeds university in 1993 but plumped for the T.A.'s infantry regiment, the section which does the fighting. He swapped to the signals three years later

when he began work at Van den Bergh foods in Purfleet because it was the only regiment nearby. He said: "I'm glad I made the change. Modern warfare is very fast so communications is the part of the army still growing. "If it came to war we would provide the communications to all the people supplying sites with food and ammunition."

As a graduate Paul was able to join the T.A. as an officer and is now second lieutenant of the Southend troops. He said: "In my civilian job I have never had to stay up for 36 hours in a row or put myself under so much pressure. I've learned I have to watch myself becoming irritable when I'm tired. I have these guys to look after and I have to worry about their morale."



■ New recruit — Michelle Blackman only signed up in November but has already excelled in many of the physical and mental tests 98/4026/15

St Thomas opts for global fete celebration

By GREG DEMETRIOU

A CELEBRATION of different global cultures will help make this year's St Thomas of Canterbury School fete an outstanding success. The United Nations theme will see many of the world's cultures represented on the day in dress, song and dance. Organisers are hoping to raise thousands of pounds and attract visitors from around the borough. More than 50 stalls are expected at the Ward Avenue school in Grays for the big day on Saturday, July 18. Final preparations are being put in place with the emphasis on enjoyment catering for all the family. The annual event has grown and grown with organisers pledging this year will be the best fete yet. Phil Cooper, PTA chairman, said: "This is a very important day for

SCHOOL WILL HAVE 50 STALLS

the community of Thurrock, as the sheer scale of the organisation is very similar to a country fair. "We are always asked can we beat last year for enjoyment and really be up to scratch again. "I believe with our largest ever range of stalls, our football competition, and our main arena attractions ranging from country music to Spice Girl dancers — this year will be the best to date." Foods from various cultures will be represented in the marquee, and can be washed down with wine and beer from around the world. Jim Patterson, fete co-ordinator, said: "The parents at the school really get together and give their full support, and this is reflected in both the quality and the size of the event."

Man injured at pub

POLICE rushed to a Southend pub car park after reports a man had suffered head injuries — only to find that the victim had in fact had a pint too many and fallen over. The man, in his 30s and from Leigh, almost severed his ear by falling over at closing time outside The Bell pub on the A127 in Southend. He was taken to Southend Hospital where he sobered up and had stitches to the wound on his ear.

Floral show

GET a feeling for all things floral at Southend Floral Arrangement Club's next meeting on July 15. The meeting will be held at the Baptist Church hall, Clarence Road, Southend, from 7.30pm with guest demonstrator Daphne Grant. For details call 01702 615521 or 01702 472731.

Floral show

A THIEF smashed a pane of glass in a front door to get into a house in Hobblythick Lane, Westcliff. An £80 necklace was stolen during the break-in and £50 damage caused to the door.

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