

The Visit with The Army

The plane arrived in Southampton at 3.15 pm and the Rev Dr Jim Francis, Staff Chaplain, was there to meet us. He drove us to Amport House, the Armed Forces Chaplaincy Centre (AFCC), where we were to stay for the next few days. We had a mug of tea with Rev Dr Scott Shackleton, head of School and a former chaplain in the Commandos, before going to look round the Chaplaincy Museum. It was very easy to follow the history of chaplaincy from the posters and items on display.



We then went to our room on the top floor to get ready for dinner. We had a very nice meal with an excellent glass of wine. We took the rest of the wine and our coffee to another room for a briefing on the Royal Army Chaplains' Department (RACHD) describing how the chaplains are deployed and some of the changes that are taking place as well as many of the challenges they face.

Tuesday morning started with a short service in the chapel at 8 am followed by breakfast. After breakfast Russell, the Chaplain General (CG), the Rev Dr David Coulter and Jim Francis left to go and meet with Major General Richard Sandford at HQ Regional Command and from there on to Pirbright to visit the raw recruits in their first few weeks of training.

I, on the other hand, went to a coffee morning in Tidworth with Grace Coulter, the Chaplain General's wife. I met army chaplains' wives and serving soldiers' wives and husbands. It was good to have a chat with them and to find out about their lives. Two of the chaplains' wives were fairly new, having been in a parish situation before, and they were still trying to find out what their role would be in the army. The coffee morning was helpful for them as it gave them a chance to question those with more experience. The husband of a serving soldier had been in the army himself and was now experiencing the return to civilian life. He talked to me about how the army had changed during his time of service. All the wives, whether chaplains or soldiers, all complained about the housing!! Not all wives stay with their husbands, some remain in their own homes. This means that their children remain in the same school but it also means that they only see their husbands occasionally. The downside for those who go with their husbands is that the children's schooling is interrupted and they move house every two years or so. Grace told me that she had enjoyed moving every few years with her husband.

After the coffee morning Grace took me for a lovely lunch at Molly's in the main street in Marlborough. Then we went on to Stonehenge. We walked to the site but did not actually go in, just viewed it from the perimeter fence. Grace also pointed out the outline of the Barrows and Woodhenge. We returned to Amport around 5 pm and the men returned about 6 pm. We went to an Indian Restaurant called the Pink Olive for dinner, a rather unusual name for a restaurant. The waiter was a little surprised that we hadn't booked and that we wanted a table for 4, three men and one woman. I can almost hear you asking "why were they surprised?" They were surprised because it was Valentine's Day.

Wednesday and we were off to RMAS (Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst) to see how the officers are trained. First of all we met the three chaplains, Rev Mike Parker, Rev Deiniol Morgan and Fr. Paul McCourt. After this Russell and I went our separate ways - Russell to meet the Commanding Officer and some of the officers in training while I went off to meet some of the Nepalese women (wives of the Gurkha soldiers). After a strained start, as we struggled to understand each other, we managed to

have some interesting discussions on how life as a Gurkha wife has changed over the last 10 years or so. They no longer have to wear their traditional costumes. In years gone by, if they didn't dress that way, then their husbands would be reprimanded. Like all other army wives, the biggest 'bug bear' was the army accommodation. Some of them were feeling a little frightened as in the area where they lived there had been some houses broken into and they felt insecure, especially when their husbands were posted away. One wife had been widowed last year and was still, as you would expect, struggling. Another had very poor English but the rest were quite westernised and enjoying life in the UK. They now have a good support system in place with a Gurkha Support Officer, Susmita, who organises meetings and gives direct support to those who need it. At the end of the meeting they gave me a lunch of traditional food – spiced potato and Mam-mam? - a little like Dim Sum. As I left they presented me with a Gurkha scarf.

I was taken back over to meet Russell and the rest of the group at the officers' mess for another lunch! After lunch we were given a tour of the whole site and a look round the beautiful and modern RC chapel as well as the Sandhurst Chapel. They explained that the Sandhurst Chapel had been extended and how it was paid for - each regiment made a donation to have the names of those Sandhurst trained officers who died inscribed on a pillar.



There is a great sense that chaplaincy is essential to the army as they look after everyone from the raw recruit to the senior officer, everyone can talk to a chaplain and a chaplain can communicate across the different ranks helping the officers to understand the soldiers concerns.

In the evening we had a lovely pub meal with David and Grace Coulter.

On Thursday, after prayers and breakfast, we set off for Tidford to the RRF (Royal Regiment of Fusiliers). We were met at the gate by their chaplain, Chris Kellock, and taken to meet the Commanding Officer. The CO gave us a briefing on the Fusiliers before taking us to meet some of the fusiliers and their Warrior vehicles. Russell had a shot sitting in the driver's seat and discovered that the driver does not get a good view and is dependent on instructions from others! We got a chance to speak to some of the soldiers who obviously enjoyed their jobs in the Fusiliers. Our next stop was at the welfare centre where soldiers can go for help, almost like a social work centre. From there we went to the gym to see the boxers train. There is great kudos in boxing and these boys were the current champions. They were very willing to explain all about boxing and why it was good for a soldier.

We then returned to Amport for Russell to be quizzed by the (DACG) Deputy Assistant Chaplain General on the Church of Scotland and chaplaincy and then he had a meeting about the chaplaincy centre which is threatened with closure, or at least removal to another building. Scott Shackleton and his team are constantly having to justify their existence... anxious times.

In the evening we had a formal dinner hosted by the Chaplain General. There were about 25 people present, mostly people associated with Scotland e.g. Scottish chaplains and their wives and the CO of 2 Scots. One exception was a Sergeant Major who organises all the State Occasions including Armistice and Trooping the Colour. He is quite a character and he kept me entertained throughout the meal.

On Friday we had a debriefing session and a session with the chaplain responsible for the teaching of morality and ethics in the army. After lunch we set off back to the airport and our return to Edinburgh.

This was a very revealing week for me, as I had no idea about the work that a military chaplain does and how important it is. These chaplains are very impressive people who are always there for everyone no matter what their rank. They go with the men and women into war zones but carry no arms, putting their lives on the line. We often state that young men and women are not coming to church yet in the army the chaplains are ministering to them every day. I realise now just how important military chaplains are and how much they need our support and prayers.