



1ST THE QUEEN'S DRAGOON GUARDS RUGBY FOOTBALL CLUB
SOUTH AFRICA RUGBY TOUR 2007



Tuesday 24 April. The air of expectation was high. Gathered on the Imphal Barracks parade square in Osnabruck Germany 31 members of the QDG RFC South African tour party were bedecked in their touring finery and were looking more like successful Prudential Insurance salesmen than hardened rugby tourists, all except Captain Huw Longmore, whose linen blazer looked like it had been slept in (which it probably had) and gave him the air of an expat drunk in a Mediterranean bar. It was either that or Sir Les Patterson's brother. The Commanding Officer put us in no doubt as to what needed to be achieved during the tour and the manner in which we should do it. Padre Albert then led us in prayer as we tried to illicit the support of The Lord God Almighty on our South African venture.



The journey to Frankfurt airport was reasonably uneventful although at one stage Ludwig, our German driver, had to make the coach perform a Phil Bennet-esque sidestep to avoid a lorry that had jack-knifed two or three vehicles in front of us, not the first jack-knifed vehicle we would encounter on the tour. So, straight into departures and things were going reasonably well. Everyone was being processed seamlessly, yes even the Fijians with their hard fought for visas. Surprisingly we were even allowed to take our team first aid kit on the flight without it having to be split down amongst the rest of the party. Fate had been tempted and it was then identified that Trooper Ridley's Christian name on the electronic ticket (Mark) did not match that on his Passport (Rhys). We were then subjected to the full weight of German efficiency and bureaucracy. After a frustrating hour and a half dealing with Brunhilda, one of the Rhine Maiden Valkyries working for South African Airways in Frankfurt, phone calls were made to our tour operator in Stroud and South African Airways in London and we finally managed to convince Brunhilda and her crew to let an extremely worried Rhys Ridley on the plane.



Wednesday 25 April. The flight came and went as only a 10 hour long haul flight can do. Casino Royale and Rocky Balboa appeared to be the most popular in flight movies. We transferred in Jo'burg and arrived in Durban to a balmy, sunny Caribbean like day. The rest of the day we recovered from the flight and then formed the tour committee whose task it was to enforce tour discipline; Corporal Gareth 'Sub' Thomas was elected tour chairman and his committee of snitches and bubblers were Capt Whelan, Sgt Hodgson, Cpl Owen and Tpr Schofield. As a consequence of his sartorial elegance Capt Huw Longmore was declared the first 'Dick of the Day' and was presented with a fetching pink woollen shoulder bag which he had to wear for the next 24 hours. That night the tour choir spent some valuable time rehearsing their post match 3rd Half routine, so successful was this rehearsal that Major Charlie Craven was presented a Casey Jones South African Baseball hat by 'Joost' a local South African who was obviously overcome by the emotion of the occasion (or was it that he was just drunk)?



Thursday 26 April. The following morning after a substantial South African Breakfast it was onto the Durban South Beach for our first training session. 3 hours later we emerged slightly sunburnt, very wet and extremely knackered. That said it's a pity all our PT sessions cannot be undertaken in such climatic conditions or environment, if they were I'm sure we'd all be budding Stephen Redgraves or Sebastian Coes. It certainly beats training on a cold, wet, dark

Tuesday evening in NW Europe. That afternoon it was off to the UShaka Marine World and Wet and Wild. Lt Henry Gates was chosen to get soaked by the dolphins and Lt 'Lewis' Carrol, for some reason, was chosen to kiss a dolphin. He made the mistake of telling the assembled audience that he had been coached in the art of kissing by 'Les one of HIS men!' This comment quite rightly earned him 'Dick of the Day' later that evening. I don't know about colonic irrigation but I certainly felt I'd been chronically irrigated after going down some of the larger slides. After a long 10 hour flight, a little 3rd Half rehearsal, training on the beach and a trip to UShaka Sea World no one was in the mood for a late night so by 2230hrs everyone was asleep!!



Friday 27 April. After an alcohol free night, and in preparation for our match that evening, the next morning we did some more physical training on the beach and up and down the Durban promenade. As much as we enjoyed our recent recruiting tour in South Wales when presented with the option of PT round Cardiff or PT up and down the Durban Prom I know what I'd choose. After a relaxing afternoon at 5 o'clock we all got on our bus in preparation for our journey to the Durban Harlequins ground on the Wentworth bluff in Durban, all that is except SSgts John Dunne and Lee Jones who had got a little chronologically embarrassed. Our driver for the evening was Emmanuel who liked us so much he stayed with us for the rest of the tour. On arrival at the ground we were a little concerned to see that the pitch seemed as wide as it was long and the forecasted rain had not appeared to soften the rock hard pitch. This was to be a characteristic of all tour pitches. Oh well we would have to shove the ball up our jumpers and roll it down the middle. The match report for our Wentworth fixture comes from the QDG equivalent of Paul Ackford of the Times, Major Charlie Craven:

The first game of the tour took place at the Durban Harlequins ground against Wentworth RFC. Kick-off was at 1930hrs and the setting could not have been better; a bright floodlit pitch overlooked by a large club house. The first score of the match went to Wentworth when they converted a simple penalty and it was already obvious at this early stage in the game that speed was very much on their side. After a well-worked play, LCpl Griffiths went over towards the end of the first half and Tpr Idzi converted to give QDG the advantage going in for half time.

The 2nd half took on a very different feel. The QDG side jelled and produced some excellent running rugby. The pack was very much the dominant force thus providing some good ball to the backs. Excellent running lines and support play resulted in 6 tries being scored and of those 5 were converted; 2 apiece for Cpl Thomas 446 and Tpr Bobo and further ones from Tpr Roberts 089 and Cpl Owen. Not to be completely outdone, Wentworth ran in 3 tries of their own however, the realisation that they had the speed advantage came too late and the game ended 47 – 20 to QDG.



Thanks Charlie. Post match Mr Chairman exerted his authority and issued fines to all and sundry. Songs were sung, presentations were made, friendships forged and a little beer was drunk. Our thanks must go to Durban Harlequins for allowing the use of the ground and facilities and to Greg Samuels the Wentworth coach and manager. Great hospitality.



Saturday 28 April. The day dawned bright and breezy and under the direction of our resident Army Physical Training Instructor SSgt Lee Jones we managed to sweat out a little of the alcohol consumed the previous evening. As we were being put through our paces it was flattering to be mistaken for players of the Guateng Lions Super 14 team by some less discerning locals. Of course we didn't put them straight!



That afternoon we arrived at the Asba Stadium (the Shark Tank) ready for the Super 14 fixture. Cpl Pobs Owen had been awarded 'Dick of the Day' for nearly missing training that morning. The 'Dick of the Day' ensemble had been added to and now included a fetching pink T Shirt, pink sarong and to top it off a Pink hat that Joanna Lumley or Twiggy would have been proud to wear at Royal Ascot. He had a little difficulty convincing some of the 6'6" Voortrekkers that this wasn't his attire of choice.....or was it? The game was fast and furious as only Super 14 can be and the Sharks ran out convincing winners against the Lions of Guateng. The biggest cheer of the day from QDG RFC was reserved for the Sharkettes, the Sharks cheerleaders, and the Sizzlers who performed a revealing routine pre match. Unfortunately British weather prevents such entertainment unless it's done in see through macs!!



Sunday 29 April. Emmanuel our driver met us at 6.30 the following morning along with our tour guide for the day Terry Whitfield and surprisingly just 45 minutes later we were winding our way north to the historic battlefields of Isandlwana and Rorkes Drift. Just to get us into the mood the film 'Zulu' was played on the coach DVD. The trip took a little longer than planned owing to a sugar cane semi articulated truck jack-knifing and blocking the route but Emmanuel played a blinder and took the 55 seater luxury coach on a detour more suited to a 4x4. The countryside we initially passed through was very reminiscent of Salisbury Plain but 100 times bigger. Instead of North European conifer clumps there were great plantains of gum trees; sugar cane crops provided the greenery. Passing just to the west of Ulundi and into Zululand proper the country side changed and was similar to the Albertan prairie but with impressive outcrops of rock called burls and Zulu villages dotted all over. 9kms to the east of Isandlwana we left the metalled road and passed down a graded track to the battlefield. It was truly stunning.



Adjacent to Isandlwana is a large Zulu village boasting an impressive hotel cum lodge overlooking the battlefield. It also boasts a well established church and being Sunday the congregation were in full voice and were singing as only a Zulu choir can. Having paid our registration fee at the small, but excellent, museum we passed through the security gates and onto the battlefield itself. During the course of the 20th century the battlefield has been extensively pillaged by souvenir hunters but thankfully it is now extremely well maintained and administered. All over the area where the British and Colonial troops established their invasion camp were small cairns of white stones marking the last resting place of the doomed troops. A number of memorials to British and Colonial Regiments are also positioned around the battlefield. Lt Henry Gates had produced an excellent battlefield tour history that explained all the circumstances of this part of the 1st Zulu war. Lessons Learnt? Accurate and timely reconnaissance, concentration of fire power and good logistics could well have brought about a different outcome. Where have we heard that before? That said the prowess of the Zulu as both warriors and as a fighting formation was severely underestimated.



The route from Isandlwana to Rorkes Drift consists of a graded track adjacent to the route Chelmsford took when he invaded Zululand for the first time. It also follows the

route taken by Melvill and Coghill when they made a heroic but ill fated attempt to save the colours of the 24th. We passed over the famous Buffalo River and then up to Rorkes Drift itself. Although most of the original buildings have long gone there is again an excellent museum on the site of the De Witts hospital and it was easy to imagine how things would have been. Both sites were extremely poignant and although it was an extremely long day from youngest Trooper to oldest Major it was one we would not have missed and will remember for many years to come.

Monday 30 April. 'Another sunny day in paradise'. After a restful night the team once again assembled on South Beach in the morning for a pre-match run out in preparation for the evening game. After training our bags were packed in preparation for the early start the next day. The ever faithful Emmanuel was once again our driver for the evening as we wound our way to the outskirts of Durban to the Pinetown district. We were greeted on our arrival by Pieter Le Grange and had a leisurely run out before the game began. Again Charlie describes the match:

The second game of the tour took place against Pinetown RFC at their ground in the Durban suburbs. Kick-off was at 1800hrs and the setting overlooked the local area with a small clubhouse in the background. The first score of the match went to Pinetown rather like our first match when they went over for a try in the corner. Yet again speed was on their side but unlike the opening match, they also had power and weight in their pack. SSgt Jones injured himself shortly afterwards pulling a hamstring (as physio it was felt he didn't follow his own warm up routine properly) and his replacement, Tpr Bobo, made his presence felt immediately by running in a try within the first few minutes of his appearance. Tpr Idzi duly converted it and the score remained 7 – 5 to QDG at half time.

A few changes were made during the break and as a result the 2nd half took on a very different feel. The QDG side solidified in defence and produced some more excellent running rugby. The pack fought hard in the set plays thus creating a solid platform for the backs to run from. Patience and well-worked moves resulted in 4 tries being run in and of those 3 were converted; another for Tpr Bobo and further ones from LCpl Griffiths, Cpl Thomas 446 and LCpl Thomas 398. As a result of some dogged defence, Pinetown were unable to cross our line again and the game ended 33 – 5 in our favour. Men of the match were Tpr Thomas (Welly Head) for the backs and Cpl Owen for the forwards.



Thanks again Charlie. The post match festivities then started. We were treated to a South African Braai (BBQ to you and me) plenty of red meat and salad for the fitness fanatics. If the food was not to your liking you only had yourself to blame as you cooked it yourself on the charcoal braziers. I think it's fair to say that we definitely won the 3rd half singing as well, certainly in terms of quantity and volume. The Pinetown team boasted an opera singer in their ranks so I think it's fair to say they might have beaten us in the quality of singing! Presentations and awards were made and friendships again were forged. After exhausting our 'clean routine' 3 hours later we bid our hosts a fond farewell and returned to the hotel before descending on 'Joe Cools' a bar cum nightclub on the Durban seafront.



Tuesday 1 May. After breakfast we began to check out of our Durban Hotel closely monitored by Majors Craven and Clegg. We then boarded our coach and began our journey north to Ghost Mountain; all except LCpl Welly Head Thomas and Maj George Clegg who formed the rear party and came north by means of a very expensive taxi kindly



paid for by LCpl Thomas a little later. Ghost Mountain Inn is 450km east of Johannesburg and 320km north of Durban, en route to Swaziland, Mpumalanga and Mozambique. This historic venue was built in 1962 by the Rutherford family and has since had a total rebuild and refurbishment to offer an extremely comfortable and memorable stay. Pieter Botha the hotel manager made us most welcome and the Ghost Mountain Inn is certainly a venue I would love to return to with my wife, perhaps during the British Lions Tour in 2010? The hotel looks out onto the legendary and mystical Ghost Mountain near Mkuze in Northern Zululand, and is a gateway to the cultural, historical and ecological wonders of Maputoland.



Mkuze offered us an insight into the time-honoured traditions, legends and history of the Zulu nation. Memories of a violent warring past can be relived at the site of the Battle of Ghost Mountain where Dinuzulu (son of King Cetshwayo) defeated Zibhebhu (Chief of the powerful Mandlakazi clan). On route to Ghost Mountain we stopped at the Dumazulu village where we experienced some of the local Zulu culture and tradition.

On arrival Lt Jim Carrol checked out the Hotel Spa and booked himself in for a complete facial. Being a forward this was deemed highly inappropriate behaviour and guess what? Dick of the Day again!! That evening we were treated to some more traditional Zulu Dancing which if anything was even more spectacular than that enjoyed at the Damuzulu village. There was nothing left to do but while away the remainder of the evening with a few sundowners before retiring to bed.



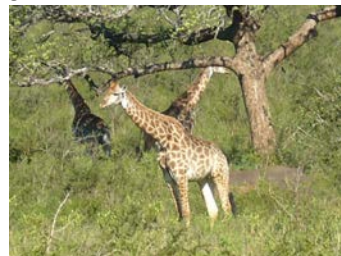
Wednesday 2 May. This was a day that will remain with me for a long time and gave us a great taste of the real Africa. We split into 2 groups and whilst the second group took a leisurely breakfast the first group assembled outside the lodge at 07.00 hours and were transferred by safari Jeep to Lake Jozini where we then boarded a boat for an early



morning cruise to view the Lakeside wildlife. The boat cruise provided an excellent opportunity to see the stunning landscape from a different perspective and under the expert guidance of Jean Toucher we managed to get up close and personal with a vast array of bird life, a family of hippos (or were they our front row?) and 40 elephants. 2 hours later we returned to the Inn and took a late breakfast whilst the second group went on their cruise.



Pieter the Inn manager informed us that recent afternoon safaris had returned from the Mkuze game drive having seen a disappointing amount of game so it was decided to 'upgrade' and take in the delights of the Hluhluwe game reserve an hour south instead. At the end of this memorable afternoon it was universally agreed that this was the best 40 Rand per person upgrade we had ever had. I was fortunate to be in the group supervised by Jean Toucher. Like Dr Doolittle she has the reputation of being able to talk to the animals, particularly the elephants who she seems to know personally, all 130 animals of the Hluhluwe herd. White Rhino, Zebra, Giraffe, Wart Hog, Buffalo, Wildebeeste were a few of the animals seen in their natural habitat. For me the defining moment was seeing the complete herd of Hluhluwe elephant cross the road and pass right in front of our noses just as the sun was going down and a full moon was rising. Thanks Jean. That evening 'fishermens tales' abounded and the more cultured members of the tour party held a sarong evening in a local bar.



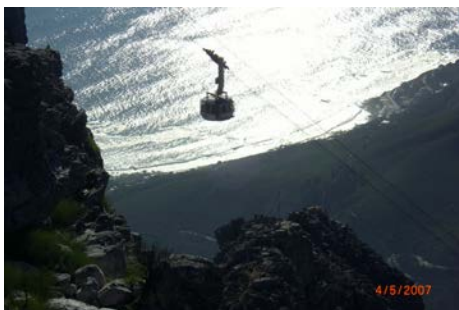
Thursday 3 May. Again we went through our check out routine and bade farewell to Ghost Mountain. Thankfully there was no need to form a rear party this time although Lt Ben Parkyns passport had to follow on later! We then travelled south again to Durban to meet our 1405 hours flight to Cape Town. The flight took approximately 2 hours and on our arrival we were met by our new driver Greg and transferred to our new accommodation at the Holiday Inn Garden Court Eastern Boulevard. Here we were met by our unofficial host Colonel Bryan Sterne of the South African Defence Force who takes it on himself to ensure all visiting British military teams are well catered for and looked after.



Friday 4 May. A bit of research that morning located an excellent local football pitch in the lee of Table Mountain quite near the hotel and we spent a couple of hours training here preparing for our 3rd match the next day.



As the day was clear and hot we decided to make hay whilst the sun was shining and get ourselves up to the top of Table Mountain pronto. The gondola ride up was excellent and the view from the top spectacular to say the least overlooking Lion Mountain, Signal Hill, Devils Peak and the city of Cape Town. Now what are the odds on Cpl Rob Jones meeting friends of his Mum's from Wrexham at the top? I wish we'd put a bet on it because that's exactly what happened. A 120m abseil was available as an activity at the top but we passed on that one. As there was a match the next day the evening was again alcohol free.



Saturday 5 May. A quick training session was undertaken straight after breakfast on our local pitch then it was onto our Coach (drive by Greg) for our ½ hr journey to Villager RFC, the second oldest club side in Cape Town and kick off at 1 o'clock. The day had turned out really hot, well over 30 degrees. The Villager RFC setting is extremely picturesque. The main pitch is surrounded by new office and club buildings built in a style similar to the Victorian Cavalry barracks at Tidworth. Our game was played on the second pitch to the right of the main complex. The match reports follows:



The kick off against Villager had been brought forward to allow everyone from both teams to go to the crunch match Natal Sharks versus the Cape Town Stormers in the final round of the Super 14. That said there was still time for the unofficial committees of both clubs to wreak havoc amongst the unsuspecting players and spectators alike in the 3rd half. The QDG plaque will now stand proudly in the Villager Clubhouse next to plaques from a myriad of other UK clubs including Richmond, Blackheath and the British Army to name but 3. The fact that a womens rugby game was being played straight after ours proved to be a bit of a bonus for the boys. Charlie again describes the action.

The third game of the tour and the first since our arrival in Cape Town, took place against The Villagers. The Villagers are the second oldest rugby club in South Africa and the club ground was befitting the historical provenance. Kick-off was at 1300hrs and as a result of the 30°C+ plus heat, the game would be two 30 minutes halves. The first score of the match went to Villagers; a habit that appears to have crept in over the tour. Unlike the previous 2 games however, the Villagers scored a further two unanswered tries leaving QDG 19 – 0 down after only 10mins. The heat was having its affect on both sides and the referee called for a couple of water stops before signalling the end of the first half.

The second half witnessed a very different QDG side. The pressure applied remained constant and the hosts struggled to get out of their own half. Two tries from LCpl Laqere and Griffiths rewarded our dogged determination and with 5 minutes left on the clock the score stood at 19 – 12. All hopes of a draw / win were dashed when QDG allowed an unchallenged run through the defence for a very soft try. Sterling performances by Lt Gates, LCpl Laqere and Tpr Bobo could not turn the game around and the final score was 26 – 12 to our hosts.

Down at a packed Newlands stadium the Sharks team again featured Springbok players like Percy Montgomery, AJ Venter and Bobby 'the biscuit' Skinstadt on the bench. The Stormers boasted Bok players like Brent Russel and Scot Burger. The atmosphere was fantastic and the Sharks ran out winners earning themselves a home semi final against the Auckland Blues. That night it was down to Tiger Tiger one of Cape Towns biggest night club venues where the boys rubbed shoulders with the Springbok players who had been on show earlier.



Sunday 6 May. After a well earned lie in we had a cultural day savouring the delights of Camps Bay, particularly the beach and fish restaurants, and the Cape Town flea market.



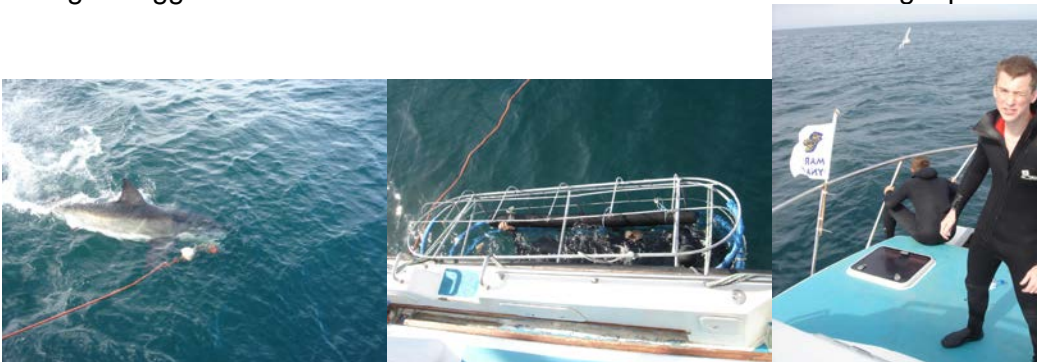
Monday 7 May. Today Charlie took a few of the more cultured rugby players on a tour of some vineyards including Fairview and Simonsvlei in Paarl, La Motte in Franschhoek (which unfortunately was shut!) and finally Spier in Stellenbosch. He even managed to get a photo of himself with a statue of his distant cousin Dr Danie Craven the demi-god of South African rugby. The remainder did some 'So we can go next time again shopping' on the Cape Town Waterfront whilst George Clegg sampled the Mobray golf course and professed to have broken 100. Hmmm another fishermans tale? We are convinced it was at the Crazy Golf Course on the waterfront.



Tuesday 8 May. 1/2 of the squad decided to go Shark diving whilst the less daring 1/2 went fishing off Robben Island. Although only a 3 Gurgens and 2 Dogfish were caught it was worth the money to see Cape Town from the sea and also see Cpl Robb Jones providing the fish with a little ground bait of his own!! An old sea dog he is'nt!



Meanwhile Capt Jon Whelan took his intrepid bunch to dice with death and Great White Sharks!! Apparently at least 6 of the hardened soldiers succumbed to the vagaries of the swell and embarrassed themselves in front of a very glamorous marine biologist from Lancashire. The shark size encountered varied dependant on whom you talked to but the largest seems to have been in the vicinity of 4m long, nearly as big as the dog fish George Clegg wrestled onto the deck of the Grand West on the fishing trip!



Wednesday 9 May. Our final match day. Again training was undertaken on the local football pitch and we made a small contribution to their club funds for the use of their facilities. Handling and passing were the main skills addressed. Later the day turned cloudy and there was a possibility of rain. Thankfully it was certainly a lot cooler than the previous Saturday. We arrived at Hamilton RFC (the oldest club in South Africa) to find we were one match in a pretty packed schedule of evening games. The Hamilton senior sides were entertaining Stellenbosch University and the standard was impressive. Major Charlie Craven again describes the action:



The final match of the tour witnessed two very different halves. The younger element of the squad took to the field and played with the heart and gusto of the Gareth Edwards' era. The opposition were a well drilled and experienced side and it was the first time that QDG had come under such pressure in the set pieces. This however, did not prevent a first for the tour as QDG opened the scoring with a well-worked move ending in LCpl Hopkins going over for a try in the corner. This was followed by a further two tries by SSgt Dunne and Tpr Bobo both of which were converted by the Captain, Cpl Thomas 446. The half-time whistle blew and QDG were 19 – 5 up. The second half belonged very much to the hosts. They re-grouped and ran in a further 2 tries leaving them 19 – 15 down with one final move of the game left. There was no finesse to their final play; give the ball to the openside flanker and run it up the middle. Unfortunately QDG tackling seemed to have already finished the match and Hamilton were rewarded with a very soft try under the posts. Pipped at the final post, we lost 22 – 19. A disappointing result however, a number of the younger element demonstrated great promise for the future and to that end Tpr Ridley was awarded man of the match.

There was certainly much disappointment that we came so close to ending the tour on a winning note and an air of frustration that we had lost the game literally on the last play. That said we picked ourselves up and ensured that as far as the 3rd half was concerned we went out on a high. More friends were made and the South Africans were very impressed with our choral Welsh singing. It was also extremely gratifying for us to see that many of our friends from Villager RFC had also come down to Hamilton to cheer us on and wish us well. As well as the normal round of presentations to Hamilton RFC we also presented Colonel Bryan with a regimental plaque in thanks for his interest and efforts in ensuring our stay in Cape Town was so enjoyable. Colonel Bryan is pictured here at home with the boys of the QDG front row at Hamilton Rugby Club.



Thursday 10 May.

This was our final full day in South Africa spent quietly packing and undertaking last minute shopping. That evening we held our end of tour dinner in a Quay 4 waterfront seafood restaurant. The 'Best Tourist' award was made to Cpl Sub Thomas, the 'Most improved Player' went to LCpl Hartt and the 'Tour Wimp' was awarded to Tpr Idzi after approaching the physio for a massage on his minute graze. Player of the tour? That was LCpl Griff Griffiths who consistently put in some excellent performances at centre. In addition to these official awards there was much back-slapping amongst the front row! At the conclusion of the evenings festivities some of the more sensible (boring?) tourists called it a night in preparation for the early start the next day whilst the lunatic fringe/hardened element decided to have one last beer at the Dubliner Bar on Long Street.

Friday 11 May. After an initial chronological hiccup by some we managed to depart our Hotel in good order at 0340hrs in the morning. Greg our driver ensured we arrived at the airport in plenty of time to meet our 0430hrs check in time, indeed both our tour drivers from ATLAS were excellent and did their company and us proud. Check in almost went seamlessly. The South African Airway check in girls seem almost reluctant to let our 3 Fijians exit the country!! Again the 10 hour flight came and went as did the 4 hour coach journey from Frankfurt to Osnabruck and at just after midnight we arrived back in Imphal Barracks tired but extremely satisfied. All credit to the officers; they had to continue the motion in London at the Cavalry Memorial Weekend.

All in all the boys did themselves, 1st The Queen's Dragoon Guards and the British Army proud. The tour served to reinforce and promote the Corinthian ideals of our great game; hard and committed matches played within the rules of the game underlined by excellent sportsmanship. In terms of player and personal development the tour was again a great success. We forged lifetime friendships, saw a great sporting nation first hand and took in the country's diverse geography, history and culture. It will provide a lifetime of memories and anecdotes for us all and we unreservedly thank all those who assisted us by providing support, funding, sponsorship, organisation, administration and hospitality. "Anyone for the British and Irish Lions tour of South Africa in 2010?"

