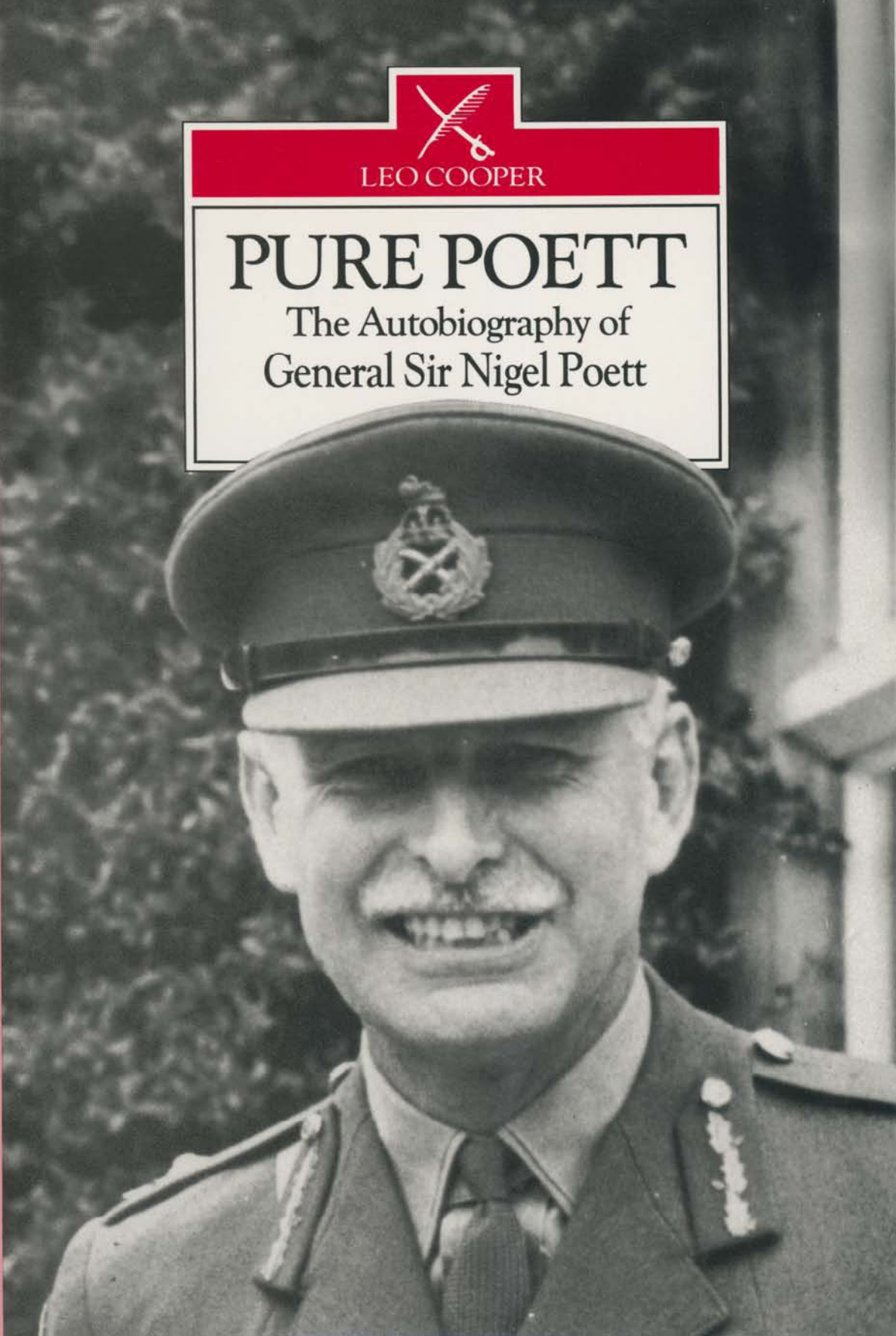
LEO COOPER
PURE POETT
The Autobiography of
General Sir Nigel Poett

Pure Poett

PURE POETT

The memoirs of
GENERAL SIR NIGEL POETT
KCB, DSO and bar

LEO COOPER
LONDON

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To
My Wife
who made my
Army Life
such
a Happy One

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INTRODUCTION

I have been bullied by my children and others into passing on a few of the experiences of my life. My family know how much I have enjoyed myself. I hope that this account will show some of the reasons.

My grandfather was a consultant physician. After his first wife died, he retired and travelled. He went first to Chile where he married again. His second wife was Mary McMichael who became my grandmother. After a few years in Chile, he went on to California and arrived there in 1849. In California, his ship was delayed because of the Gold Rush and the crew deserted.

My grandfather then bought some land at San Mateo, near San Francisco and lived there for a number of years. He had with him the children of his first marriage. By now they were grown up. They all married in California and settled there. As a result I have many American relations in that State.

In about 1856 my grandfather returned to England and lived at Richmond, near London. My father was born there in 1858. He was educated at Beaumont College, Windsor, and then went to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. He was commissioned in 1876 into the 39th Regiment of Foot, The Dorsetshire Regiment.

In 1880 he saw service in the Afghan War of 1876 and then in the Bechuanaland Expedition of 1884. Later that year he was with Methuen's Horse in South Africa.

In 1890 he qualified at the Staff College at Camberley and then, in 1892, went on to become an Instructor at the R.M.C. Sandhurst. While on holiday in Dresden he met my mother, Julia Caswell, an American from Providence, Rhode Island. They were married in 1889. My eldest sister Phyllis was born in 1890 when the family was at Sandhurst, my sister Elizabeth followed in 1892 and then Evelyn in 1895.

Other Staff appointments followed Sandhurst, then a spell of Regimental Duty. In 1899 the Boer War broke out and my father was posted to Lord Roberts' staff. He continued on the GHQ staff when Lord Kitchener took over command. By the end of the war, he had become Assistant Adjutant General, gained three Mentions in Despatches and was made a Companion of the Bath. He had been awarded the Queen's South Africa Medal with four

clasps and the King's South Africa Medal with two clasps. He had also been appointed a Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel.

My father now found himself appointed to the same staff post under Lord Kitchener's successor. This was not at all what he wanted. Command of the 1st Battalion of the Dorsetshire Regiment was about to come up and that was what he hoped for. The C-in-C supported him and, in due course, he was selected to command the Battalion which was then in India. My father much enjoyed his period in command and has written in detail about it. His memoirs have been serialized in the magazine, *The Great War*, 1989 and 1990 editions. His family had accompanied him to India and much enjoyed it there. In 1907 he was promoted Brigadier-General and served first as Deputy Adjutant General and then Chief of Staff, Eastern Command, India. 1907 was also the year in which my twin sister Angela and I were born.

When my mother realized that she was going to have another baby she left for England. My father remained in India and the family rented Rew House, at Winterborne St Martin close to Dorchester.

On 20 August, 1907, we twins appeared. Angela was slightly ahead of me. There was great jubilation in the family to have a boy at last. Angela was a sturdy baby from the outset but I was a weakly one. However, all possible care was lavished on me and I soon became a healthy child.

CHAPTER I

Growing Up

The family returned to India shortly after the birth of the twins. I have no recollection of this period of my life, but in my father's memoirs he has left a detailed and interesting account. By 1910 he had spent a great many years abroad, particularly in India. He now had an urge to start a new life and fancied farming in British Columbia.

The Canadian Pacific Railway at that time was offering attractive terms for the purchase of land. Like many soldiers my father had a longing for a property of his own. His family also welcomed the idea of settling down. Accordingly when his staff appointment, which had already been extended for a year, was completed, he sent in his papers and left for home with his family.

In due course the purchase of a suitable property was negotiated and we moved to Canada. At that time my twin and I were four years old. The property was near Lake Windermere in a very beautiful district of the Rockies. The CPR had indicated their intention of building a railway close to the property which would increase its value.

The family settled down well with pleasant neighbours and lots to do. We children enjoyed the winter season with its tobogganing, skating and so on. In the summer, there were picnics and bathing.

When my father went to Canada he was 54 years old and he found the manual work hard. Sufficient help was not easy to come by. It was all very different to life in India, with a comfortable house and lots of servants. They missed the close friends they had had there and in Europe. Also my mother had not been well in Canada. Early in 1914, after a good deal of thought, they conclud

ed that the Canada experiment had been a mistake. They let the ranch for a three-year term and returned to England. On reaching London my father rented a house near Kensington Gardens while they were considering where to live.

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In the meantime we children had to start our education. It was decided that a French governess should be employed to look after us and teach us. We were then 6 years old and a considerable handful. In Canada we had led a wonderfully free life and by English standards our discipline was only moderate! We did not enjoy walks in the park nor the frequent visits to museums. The first two governesses found us more than they could manage. Eventually Miss Hayes, an experienced English governess, was engaged. She was splendid. She kept us in order, but we were devoted to her. She taught us extremely well and by the time we went to school we were both above the level of our age group.

London, before the First War, was full of interest for us children. The short stops in London, during our journeys to and from India and Canada, were quite different to living there. Everything was new and exciting, but our household was entirely a woman's world and it was decided that I should go to a boarding school as soon as I was seven and a half. A Catholic private school, where my Coats cousins had been, was selected. It was at Ladycross in Sussex and was called Ropers. And so, at the beginning of the summer term in 1915, I set off for school.

As soon as we had got back from Canada in 1914, war seeming certain, my father offered his services to the War Office. Soon after the War broke out Lord Kitchener became Secretary of State for War and put his great energies towards the formation of what became known as 'Kitchener's Army'. It was to be composed entirely of Volunteers and my father was one of its first Brigade Commanders.

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Thanks to Miss Hayes, I found myself, when I went to school, well ahead in the work. As a result I did little and soon dropped back. Unfortunately for me, because my father was away, I had not been briefed in the customs of a school. For example I did not

know that a master should be called 'Sir'. On the first morning I was called to the desk and given a smart smack on the cheek. I had no idea what it was for and quickly received another. However, I soon learnt and settled down well at Ropers.

One hears a lot about bullying, but I don't recall any at Ropers, nor later at Downside. I enjoyed my time at school, particularly the games. After my first year, I was promoted from soccer to rugger, which was a great advantage when I went on to Downside.

About a year after I went to Ropers my sister Angela went to school at Roehampton. We were close twins and she had not enjoyed being left alone with Miss Hayes during termtime.

During 1915 my father was appointed Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster-General of the newly formed IX Corps, which was to take part in the Gallipoli Campaign. His Staff experience well qualified him for the appointment, but he was sad to leave his 55th Brigade, which he had looked forward to leading in France. However, it was War Office policy to send to France only younger men as Brigade Commanders. My father was 57 at the time and it came as a bitter blow to him. The 55th Brigade had been his baby. He had received the men as raw recruits and, with few officers or NCOs, he had trained them to become an efficient fighting formation of which he was proud. When they went to France he was to receive glowing reports of their achievements which gave him great pleasure.

In 1917 I moved from Ropers to Downside, a Catholic public school with an excellent Junior School, where I was very happy. It was run by Benedictine monks but half the teaching staff were lay masters. I made good progress at Rugger and got into the appropriate teams as I advanced up the school. I ended with three years in the 1st XV.

Except for my first year, Father Trafford, later Abbot Trafford, was Headmaster. He was a very remarkable character, a strict disciplinarian but respected and liked by the boys. He virtually ran the school.

Father Trafford gave up teaching when he became Headmaster, but he kept a finger in every pie. He knew all the boys. It was a fearsome occasion to be sent to him by a master and sometimes involved a punishment that hurt a great deal. Bathing would be forbidden after such a visit as we bathed without clothes in the swimming pool and the marks would be very apparent! Apart

from unpleasant visits to the Headmaster, he would send for boys at random or call them into his room when they were asking for what was known as a 'long sleep'. This meant that one did not have to get up for early Mass. A long queue would form outside his room in the evening. If a boy had not asked for a long sleep for some time, he would sit him down in an armchair in his study and talk to him. It was an informal chat and enjoyed by the boys. In this way he got to know every boy in the school.

The Officers' Training Corps was another favourite of the Headmaster. The school employed a retired regular officer to run the Corps and to help him a splendid Foot Guards Sergeant-Major, who had afterwards been a 'Beefeater'. In spite of this high-powered staff, the Headmaster could not resist coming on parade himself and inspecting us. If his eagle eye lighted on a dirty button, it would be 'Up to my room, boy!'

My father, after his period with 9th Corps, was appointed to Salonika as Base Commandant in the rank of Major-General. That theatre was in the process of being developed and he found the job most interesting. Before long the problem of age caught up with him once more. He was now 58, was posted home and felt lucky to obtain an appointment with a District on the Lines of Communication in France. He was, therefore, abroad when the question arose of what I was likely to want to do and my school work be adjusted accordingly. The Headmaster had no doubt it should be the Army. This seemed natural and the Headmaster's proposal was accepted. Accordingly, I was put in the Army Class, which involved an emphasis on physics, chemistry and maths. I have always regretted the physics and chemistry at the expense of English and the Classics.

As one advanced in the school, life became more and more interesting. I much enjoyed it when I became a School Prefect and head of my house. At that time there were no housemasters. The Headmaster dealt directly with the School Prefects. The Head of the school had a very nice large room in the same passage as the Headmaster and we used to congregate there in the evenings. The Headmaster would come in and talk, and often used to ask us into his room to play bridge. And so my last term at school passed very pleasantly.

Now came the time for the Army Exam. The most important part of this was what was called 'Interview and Record'. The Headmaster would do his stuff on 'Record', the rest was up to

me. But the Headmaster was not one to leave anything to chance. He had done his bit and now he briefed me in the greatest detail, even to the extent of telling me I must go to Trumper's in Curzon Street to get my hair cut. All passed off well and a letter arrived to say that I had been nominated for Sandhurst. I was to report early in January, 1926, as a Gentleman Cadet. In those days the parents paid for their sons to go to Sandhurst. Now the cadet is paid as a soldier.

I have always been grateful to Downside and more particularly to Father Trafford. Both my sons went to Downside in their turn.

CHAPTER II

Sandhurst

Whether or not we were called 'Mr Poett-Sir', we soon learnt our position. We were in the hands of a very excellent team of Brigade of Guards Sergeant-Majors. The smallest error in movement or dress would bring forth a roar! In fact, apart from being an extremely efficient lot, they were basically kindly.

On our first parade as 'Juniors' all of us had to shout out the name of the Regiment we wished to join. The Regimental representatives then got hold of us to see whether they thought we would fit in. We were all still in plain clothes, so there was a period of measuring and fitting for the many uniforms required. The periods allowed between activities were extremely short and all movement had to be done at the double or on bicycles. The bicycle was an essential part of our equipment and there was even a drill for bicycle parade.

We soon got into the routine. There was an immense amount of cleaning and polishing in our lives. The standard was perfection. I was in the old buildings and had a big double room to myself. All Gentleman Cadets, as we were called, had college servants who cleaned our rooms and made our beds. For a 'consideration' they would also help with polishing our belts, boots and riding gaiters.

Games were a most important feature of our lives. Soon after our arrival, I played in a trial for the R.M.C. rugger team. Unfortunately I received a heavy tackle and badly damaged the cartilage of my knee. This injury affected the rest of my time at Sandhurst and indeed hampered me permanently. I was not allowed to play any more rugger. Fortunately I had played goal in the Downside hockey team, was lucky to get into the R.M.C. hockey XI straight away and soon got my 'Blue'. The ban on playing rugger was a blow, as that was my main enjoyment. I was, however, continuing to have a lot of trouble with my knee. I could not

kneel down as required on some weapon training exercises and there were other snags.

During the Summer term my knee got very bad and it was decided that an operation was necessary. I was sent to the Cambridge Hospital at Aldershot and all was ready for the operation when Sister Agnes of Boer War fame got to hear of it through an aunt of mine who was a close friend. In those days the Cambridge Hospital did not have the high reputation it has today. Sister Agnes got in touch with my parents and, with their agreement, she took charge. She was a pretty powerful lady! She rang the Cambridge Hospital and said that I was to be sent to her hospital, King Edward VII Hospital for Officers, in London, immediately in a taxi. The Cambridge Hospital was furious and the Sandhurst Authorities not pleased. Sister Agnes would not give way – she was very determined – and in no time I was speeding for London.

My family had taken a house at St Briac in Brittany for the summer. They had my sister Angela with them and could not change their plans, but Sister Agnes had taken charge! She had selected Mr Elmsley to do the operation. Unfortunately Elmsley was away and he could not do the operation at once. This meant that by the time he could manage it, Sister Agnes' Hospital would be closed for the summer holiday, during which she always went to Balmoral to stay with the Royal Family. So she arranged for the operation to be done at another nursing home. In the meantime, I stayed on at Sister Agnes' and was allowed freedom to go where I liked. In those days the nursing home was at 17 Grosvenor Crescent and Sister Agnes's house was next door, at number 16. She lived there in considerable style, with a butler, footmen and so on. She gave pleasant dinner parties, to one of which I was invited. She seemed to know everyone in London.

The time came for my operation and Sister Agnes attended it. The nursing home was a very different affair to 17 Grosvenor Crescent, where all the nurses seemed, to a boy of 18, well into middle age and wore dark dresses, whereas the nurses in the nursing home were young and attractive. When Sister Agnes came to see me the day after the operation she teased me about the good-looking nurses. She was wonderfully kind to me.

When I left the nursing home I went to Sussex to stay with my aunt and went to the nearest hospital for massage. It turned out that the operation had not been a complete success.

I went back to Sandhurst at the end of the summer break. I had missed a lot of the work and still had to be excused a good deal of the more strenuous activities. Altogether, that hard rugger tackle had greatly interfered with my time at Sandhurst.

The time now came for me to settle, finally, the Regiment for which I wished to apply. The Dorsetshire Regiment would have been a natural for me. I was very fond, however, of anything to do with horses and the Durham Light Infantry appealed to me very much. It was more than twenty years since my father had commanded the Dorsetshire Regiment and he had lost touch. The D.L.I had a tremendous polo reputation and he was happy for me to apply for them.

Now my final term at Sandhurst was coming to an end. I soon heard that I had been successful in getting the D.L.I. vacancy and that I would be gazetted to the regiment on 1 September, 1927. The Passing-Out Parade followed and then a big dinner in London with friends.

Sandhurst was over and I had enjoyed it.

CHAPTER III

The Durham Light Infantry

Soon after leaving Sandhurst, I received my joining instructions from the War Office. I was to join the 1st Battalion the Durham Light Infantry at Southampton and embark with them for Egypt in November, 1927. This was splendid news. We would be stationed at Alexandria; it was a single-battalion station and a popular one. The rest of the British Troops, Egypt (B.T.E.), as the army in Egypt was called, were split between Cairo and the Canal Zone.

I now had two months' leave to get myself ready. The Regiment sent me lists of the uniform and other kit I would require and the names of the regimental tailors. My father chose Hawkes which had been his tailor. Then followed fittings for uniform and plain clothes, plus a great deal of advice from my father's army friends in Bath! My family had bought Filleigh House on Bathwick Hill a few years before I went to Sandhurst.

All went well with the preparations, except, probably, the large bills that resulted. I was given a very fine Purdey gun and then, at the suggestion of my new Commanding Officer, a saddle, so when I set off to join my Regiment at Southampton, I was grateful and happy.

We were to sail on the Hired Transport *City of Marseilles*. It was not up to usual 'trooper' standard but was an ideal way of getting to know people in the Regiment; also to learn more about the Regiment and what should or should not be done.

The routine on board was designed to keep everyone as busy as possible. P.T. featured daily and there were lectures about Egypt and a variety of other subjects. There were daily parades and inspections and as much drill as the deck space allowed. I shared a cabin with an officer called Richardson, a very nice man and an excellent officer. I learnt a lot from him. I had been allotted a platoon and the voyage was an ideal chance to get to know

them. They were about my age and friendly. Almost all of them were Geordies from Tyneside. None had been abroad before and it was all a great excitement for them.

Their accommodation below decks was terrible. They slept in hammocks hung in the small spaces allotted. One of the jobs of a subaltern was to visit the entire ship every hour and check on the sentries who were placed at intervals, as a protection against fire. The job of visiting was split up into four-hour periods. It was not pleasant, particularly at night and in rough weather. The atmosphere was extremely thick and squeezing between the hammocks difficult. Midnight to 4am was a particularly unpopular time.

And so the journey passed – now into the Mediterranean and an improvement in the weather – and then Alexandria. We steamed into the harbour but were not to disembark until the next morning.

Alexandria was a large city, a mixture of new and old, of Europe and the East, the old Native quarter with its bazaars, each dedicated to a different trade, merging into the European quarter with its wide, tree-lined streets and modern buildings and shops. It was an important centre for trade in the Eastern Mediterranean with a mixed population of Europeans, Egyptians, Arabs and Levantines. Most had business interests in cotton and other products of the East.

The Regiment was to be quartered at Mustapha Barracks which were on the outskirts of the city on the seashore. It comprised a large number of wooden huts, close to the beach, and some two-storied buildings. These larger buildings contained the offices, quartermasters' stores and other administrative functions. The Officers' Mess and our living quarters were two-storied buildings close to the Mess. Our rooms were comfortable and airy with plenty of bathrooms. There was a 600-yard rifle range in the barrack area, firing out to sea. The accommodation huts surrounded a tarmac parade ground. Altogether it was a pleasant and convenient set-up. One could put on bathing trunks in one's quarter and walk down to the beach.

The stables and the transport lines were at the opposite end of the barracks to the rifle range. One of the first things that the Regiment did after our arrival was to plan for the polo season which would start in the following Spring. Both the D.L.I. battalions had polo clubs, with valuable polo funds. The system was