

It wasn't to be

Twenty years ago, a young, opinionated musician surprised many of his mates by joining the Army

Interview: Anthony Stone

UP to nine million people a week in Britain tuned in to the second series of the BBC1 documentary *Soldiers To Be* to watch a platoon of new recruits slog their way through basic training. It was gripping stuff, helped by the fact that the programme-makers found the perfect been-there-done-that narrator to do the voice-over.

Many will remember Billy Bragg for his political campaigning in the late 1980s when the singer popped up everywhere and told us to vote Labour. More recently he has been heard guest-presenting Johnny Walker's Saturday show on Radio 2 and fronting TV music programmes.

Now 40, married and a father, he continues to make records that speak to the heart and takes every opportunity to put his political message across.

On the face of it, the idea of Billy Bragg in an Army uniform is as about as likely as David Beckham wearing a pair of M&S Y-fronts. The story of how Bragg came to enlist and his brief Army experience have informed some of his best songs.

SUBCONSCIOUS VIBES

"I was working as a painter and decorator in west London and every day on the way to the tube walked past the Army recruiting office," he said. "Subconsciously I was getting a bit of a vibe from it."

Billy was at a crossroads. He recalled the advice of his careers master at school in Barking, Essex. His job prospects, he had been told, were not limitless. He was sure he did not want to work at the Ford plant in Dagenham, which to his mind left only three options: the Army, Royal Navy or the Royal Air Force.

"I think in the early 1980s the Army was a great sponge for working-class lads who did not feel they had many prospects apart from going to work in the local factory or down a pit," he said.

"I was standing on a stepladder getting paint in my face and thought, 'Sod this, I am not doing this all my life'. I went into



Billy Bragg: "... it was down to me and another guy who would be the best recruit."

the Army Careers and Information Office in Acton and signed on."

He told his recruiters he wished to drive tanks and didn't want to go to Northern Ireland as he didn't believe in what the British Government was doing there.

So, at 23 – the oldest person in his intake – the man who had once been a punk rocker joined The Queen's Royal Irish Hussars. This chimed in with family history as Billy's father had been a tank driver in India during the Second World War – circumstances which also gave Billy a love of Rudyard Kipling, whom his father was fond of quoting.

The young soldier took his first steps

towards a career in the Royal Armoured Corps. But it was not to be and he asked for premature voluntary release at the end of basic training.

"I twigged that it was not really for me. A lot of guys left in that first week. The sergeant said, 'What you see in the first week is not really the Army. Do the whole thing and if you still want to leave at the end of it I will sign your papers, no problem.'

"I took him at his word and worked my hardest at everything, to the extent that it was down to me and another guy who would be best recruit. But it just was not for me. I really had a go at it. That's why I

for this soldier

Why I joined up

"I did not join up out of the blue. Reagan and Thatcher had just been elected and they were stoking up the Cold War again. Tito had just died, Solidarity was going off. I read *The Third World War* by Gen Sir John Hackett and really thought it was going to happen.

"Did I want to be sitting on my arse in east London when it went off, or did I want to be sitting in my tank on the West German plain?"

My intake

"I try my hardest to remember what my sergeant said and I remember the guys I went through basic training with. They were a lovely bunch of whom I have only good memories. I saw them turning from a spotty rabble into a real crew."

Homosexuality

"Homosexuality is obviously different, but it is not communicable, it's not as if you can catch it by talking to someone. Attitudes in the Army lag behind attitudes in society by ten to 15 years."

was very concerned about setting the right tone for *Soldiers To Be*."

Janet Harris, the series co-producer, explained the decision to ask Billy to do the voice-over. "When we showed him the rough cuts he really knew what these young men and women were going through.

"I think the film reminded him of his own experiences."

Because it didn't work out for Billy in the Army, it would have been easy for him to have left with a chip on his shoulder. "One of the things my sergeant said when I left was, 'Whatever you do when you get back to civvy street, don't become anti-

squaddie. Just remember these are just ordinary guys.'

"You know, I have very strong political beliefs but I have never allowed myself to stereotype squaddies. I have always tried to remember that."

Billy's inside-track meant he could spot the recruits who were not going to make it in *Soldiers To Be*.

"Some were clearly there because they had run out of things to do, crashing through various options like a cannonball through a cornfield. It was clear that they weren't going to survive it. There were clearly other guys who had gone in and it changed their attitudes to life and motivated them."

While Billy was doing his basic training it gradually occurred to him what he really wanted to do with his life and, in a way, the Army helped him to achieve it.

"It was not having the opportunity to play guitar, write songs and appear on stage that made me realise what I really wanted," he said.

RAISED EYEBROWS

"I have never made a huge thing about being in the Army but I thought from the beginning of my musical career I should be honest and let people know. It was difficult enough having admitted it to go and play in Belfast, where it raised a few eyebrows.

"I have always tried to stress that people who join the Army don't do so just to kill people. They join for many different reasons, and that is what I have tried to make people understand."

Since Billy's day, the Army has undergone a sea change in attitudes to behaviour and discrimination, something he welcomes.

"The Army is an over-macho profession by its nature. My experience was that very few of the young men who I went through basic training with had ever met anyone who was gay and had no experience of gay culture. And it was the same for people of colour.

"I am Billy Bragg and I have my own personal agenda. My feeling about changing the world is to communicate to as many people as I can my own ideas, which is why it is important for me to talk to *Soldier*. I realise that you don't often interview people from my point of view.

"My involvement with *Soldiers To Be* will hopefully have drawn people in to watch the programme and then perhaps they will get a different perspective about soldiers being ordinary lads and lasses."

Brothers in arms

BILLY'S song *Tender Comrade* examined the emotional bonding between soldiers, which allows one to feel he could die for another on the battlefield.

"There is a bonding there that is much deeper between males than in

normal society,"

he said. "It has nothing to do with homosexuality. It is a much deeper experience than you ever get in civvy street.

"You look at old soldiers, particu-

larly those who have been in combat, and you understand that they have such a deep bond."



Tender Comrade by Billy Bragg

What will you do when the war is over,
tender comrade?
When we lay down our weary guns,
When we return home to our wives and
families
And look into the eyes of our sons?
What will you say of the bond we had,
tender comrade?
Will you say that we were brave
As the shells fell all around us,
Or that we wept and cried for our mothers
And cursed our fathers
For forgetting that all men are brothers?

Will you say that we were heroes,
Or that fear of dying among strangers
Tore our innocence and false shame
away?
And from that moment on deep in my heart
I knew
That I would only give my life for love.

Brothers-in-arms in each other's arms
Was the only time that I was not afraid.
What will you do when the war is over,
tender comrade,
When we cast off these khaki clothes and
go our separate ways?
What will you say of the bond we had,
Tender comrade?