

HOW IT ALL STARTED

By [Dereck Hardman RE](#) on Tuesday, 10 February 2015 at 01:09

Back in 2007, I was starting a limousine business with a BV206 military tracked vehicle. It has long since gone because of changes in the road traffic law, but at the time I was looking for someone who was ex Royal Electrical & Mechanical Engineers, who would know their way around a military vehicle, and I was pointed towards Pete Barker.

<http://pbmotorengineer.co.uk/>

I was working full time in Education back then, so I was working on the vehicle in my spare time and together with Pete on Saturday mornings. Mid morning Pete used to send someone out for breakfast, so even when I wasn't working on the vehicle, I often used to drop in on a Saturday morning for the banter; the crack.

That was it: the start.

Sometime later I met another ex servicemen, and said to him "...come to Pete Barker's on Saturday morning for around 10:00. We usually have a breakfast and some banter..."

I think I was surprised at first that guys kept coming back. I don't know why, because I enjoyed it; the camaraderie was a taste of the down time when I was a soldier, so why wouldn't anyone else feel the same?

But one guy told another guy, I told someone else, and slowly it began to grow; Pete was happy too because we all enjoyed it.

One day we were talking about it being a 'breakfast club', and I thought it amusing to call it 'Barker's Breakfast Club', giving it the initials 'BBC', and it followed that I referred to Pete as 'The Chairman', which he is known as to this day.

We have spoken about moving the breakfast club to a cafe or pub, but Pete would still have to work there on a Saturday morning, so he would not be able to join us, which is why it remains in his garage to this day... unique among the breakfast clubs.

It can sometimes seem to be a disadvantage during the cold winter months, but the cold is something we have all had to deal with in the past as servicemen and women, so I see the cold almost like an another comrade who attends with us occasionally.

The venue does also have its advantages; unlike any of the other breakfast clubs. I have often asked my partner Sue if she'd like to come along, on the rare Saturday mornings she has off when she was showing some disapproval of my impending absence for two hours, to which she replies "what, eat a greasy breakfast in some smelly old garage? No thanks!" which usually results in her grudging resignation as I depart!

One particular member of the BBC, Dennis Chapman RE, became a sort of mascot for us.

He served in the same Regiment as I did in Germany, at the same time it turns out, during the cold war, and from the moment he turned up for the first time at the breakfast club, he loved it! He clapped his hand on my back more than once, and said 'Del, thank you for this, it's great, and it's really helped me a lot'.

My reply was always 'you have no need to thank me Den, this happened by accident, and it's the people like you who come every week that make it what it is'.

We knew Dennis was ill, but what we didn't know was how ill he really was, because he always laughed with the rest of us, and never complained. The Sappers among us attend an annual event called 'Sapperfest', an event for Royal Engineers only, and Dennis was so keen to come with us, despite his illness.

I was concerned about him, so I cornered him one day and asked him outright "Dennis, tell me, what's your prognosis, and tell me the truth", and he told me that he had cancer, which I already knew, but he told me it was not an aggressive type and his medication was keeping it in check; he did say that one day it would kill him, but he had years rather than months.

We went to Sapperfest on the 4th, 5th & 6th of July 2014, and Dennis loved every moment.

He came back from Sapperfest and went almost immediately on holiday with his wife to Mexico.

Dennis was born on 15th June 1948, and he died in Mexico on 20th July 2014; he was 66.

Like many of us, he had his own Royal Engineers mug at the BBC, which is now mounted above the tea area at the garage, so we can remember him every Saturday. One week later Andy and Ron founded the GBC, which was the beginning of the proliferation, so I suppose I kind of view the spread of the breakfast clubs as Dennis's legacy.

In early 2014, I had been in touch with one of 'my lads' from my last posting for some time, Sapper Andy Wilson RE. One weekend when he and his good lady had come down from their home in Newcastle, to stay with us here in Hull, I had taken him to the 'BBC', as I had on a number of occasions before, and as usual he had thoroughly enjoyed it. It was just before Sapperfest, and the Sappers among us were planning a joint venture to travel there. We had a conversation about how much we enjoyed the breakfast club, and when Andy said he wished there was something like it in Newcastle, my response was 'start one'... I don't know why it hadn't occurred to us before. Andy enlisted the help of Sapper Ron Kitson, and together they planned to launch their own breakfast club when they returned from Sapperfest. On the 27th July 2014 they founded the 'GBC Geordie Breakfast Club', the second, closely followed by the 'NBC Northants Breakfast Club', founded by Sapper Richard Weaver, a guy I'd served with in Germany, who'd come up to the BBC in March of 2014 as a surprise for my 50th birthday, and had also thoroughly enjoyed the concept. He too had been at Sapperfest, and was enthused with the idea of starting one when he heard of Andy & Ron's plans.

Since then, 'Breakfast Clubs' have been springing up all over the country: at the last count there were 22, located from Northern Scotland and Fife, down to Dorset on the south coast; there is even one in Hannover, Germany, with a membership of ex-pats.

They are developing, evolving: I have even had to write a set of instructions on how to start a breakfast club, because I have had to explain it so many times, and I have even had to recruit some help to keep up with it all.

The concept of the Breakfast Clubs is simply groups of Veterans from all Arms, as well as serving members of Her Majesties Armed Forces, who, in short, look out for each other. Self reliance, was always our way.

Many of the members find that the breakfast club empowers them to deal with their demons, which they have been fighting since they got out: in my experience, a good many guys didn't have too much of a problem until they left, and somehow mixing with guys that know what they are talking about helps them to cope, and they are supported. I have heard this so many times; stories about veterans attending breakfast clubs, and saying teary-eyed that they feel like they have 'come home', which is why I find myself investing more and more time and effort into promoting them, and developing them!

There are no official national rules or subscriptions; individual Breakfast Clubs make their own decisions.

They generally meet every weekend, Saturday or Sunday mornings, some once a month, some fortnightly; they eat breakfast together, indulge in some good old military banter, some irreverent talk and some black humour. It is much like the best bits from when we were serving. For many of us, this also leads us to meeting socially at other times, with wives and partners, at Regimental Dinners (with our respective associations), for nights out, barbecues, parties or family occasions etc. and we network among the variety of trades the veterans all now work in.

It works so well because we all have a similar outlook on life; similar sense of humour and in many respects the social life many of the veterans of the breakfast clubs now enjoy are similar to the days when we served.

We have representatives from Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines.

I keep saying "guys" but we at the BBC, and several other clubs, also have a number of female veterans, so my apologies, for that, but it's easier to say 'guys'. If anyone wishes to come along, join in the banter, as long as they have a uniform service history, or association with such, and can cope with the sense of humour, they are welcome to just turn up on a Saturday or Sunday morning, at any of the breakfast clubs, and they will be made welcome.

To find the nearest Breakfast Club, they simply follow the link below (or copy and paste it into their browser), and choose the nearest marker to them on the map. The marker gives them the venue, day and time that the Breakfast Club meet, as well as a link to that breakfast club's Facebook Page.

<http://veteransbreakfastclubs.co.uk/meetings/>

That is the story of the Breakfast Clubs so far. I say 'so far' because who can say where it will lead?

I have been lucky enough to be the founder of the whole thing... although not by design, but in some ways it now feels like I simply pushed over the first domino!

I always refer to the breakfast clubs as the best idea I never had, and I don't feel like I can claim any credit for their success. That is entirely down to the enthusiasm of the all the members of all the Breakfast Clubs, and I look forward to seeing how they develop further in the future.