

## **"Not The Boy Next Door"**

*The following is a schoolboy's account of his time at Slim School. All events are taken from his diary, which he kept of his experiences whilst at Slim School. The author has requested anonymity so some names may have been changed.*

### **Episode 2.**

#### **My first term at Slim.**

Climbing down from the armoured wagons onto terra firma, being able to stretch one's legs was a joy. After the continuous noisy, smelly, bouncing vibrations we had endured for the last five and a half hours, we had been delivered safe and sound to our destination, Slim School.

The school was named after Field Marshall Sir William Slim who had been the High Commissioner in Malaya. A highly prized position, an appointment given by King George VI. Field Marshall Slim had recently been posted to Australia as their High Commissioner and his replacement in Malaya was Sir Henry Gurney. Sir Henry met his end on his way for a holiday at Fraser Hill. This was another hill in the highlands of Malaya not far from the Cameron Highlands. Apparently he was travelling with his wife in his Rolls Royce, accompanied by escort vehicles of the Malay Police Force and flying his personal flag on the front offside wing.

His small cavalcade was attacked, killing Sir Henry and his driver and injuring others including his wife. It is said the terrorists came down from the hills and apparently dressed the wounds of the injured, apologised to Sir Henry's wife after having patched her up and left. Once the British troops had been alerted to what had happened, they went up into the area from where the attack was made and found pieces of paper in the jungle with notes showing that the attackers had lain in wait for Sir Henry for over a week. It was therefore clear that there had been a serious breach of security somewhere down the line.

On a quick look around, the buildings of the school were quite old and built of wooden planked outer elevations with corrugated tin roofs. A group of adults, later identified as teachers, emerged from one of the buildings to greet us. A roll call was held and all those children who should have been present were indeed there except for the poorly guy who was to join us later. Major Harrison and his wife, who were the headmaster and headmistress then introduced themselves and then went on to introduce the other members of the teaching staff. We were split into four groups, senior and junior boys and senior and junior girls and then taken to our dormitories where the troops were delivering our luggage for the task of unpacking. Cases, boxes and trunks were piled sky high in a mountain of luggage, all shapes and sizes, gosh some parents had imaginative ideas of what

went as a school trunk, mine included. Beds were allocated and then the task was to find our own gear and get it unpacked.

My bed was in the junior dormitory next to the main hall. There were 10 of us youngsters and I was the youngest of all. Within minutes, all working like beavers, we managed to get our clothes stowed away in the wardrobes and chest of drawers. Each of us had our own allocated spaces to avoid any squabbling. Soon the task was completed. Matron then came along to check each storage space and to be sure that everything had been put away tidily. Our trunks and cases were then placed under our beds until the next morning, when they would be removed and put into storage until the end of term. My ex ammo box was so bloody big it wouldn't go under the bed and was stood next to it instead.

It was now eight fifteen in the evening and everyone was tired and very hungry. Supper was due to be served quite soon, so it was a quick wash and into the dining room to take our seats. Once again everything was regimented and our places were indicated with a place name card. I noticed some of the pupils who had been at the school from the opening were moving some of the nametags around to suit themselves. The duty teacher Miss Pringle entered the room, a hush descended on the gathering and the name place card swapping ceased immediately. She announced she had the role of duty teacher for the

evening and required all the boys and girls to behave properly at the meal table. Misbehaviour would be dealt with and then further explained, that this would be the case at all meal times, whoever the duty teacher was. She was a kindly looking lady and I took to her very easily. It was clear discipline was going to be exercised at all times and we would disregard her and her colleagues at our peril.

Supper completed, Miss Pringle told us that bed was next on the agenda and lights would be turned out in thirty minutes time. Reveille would be a seven o'clock in the morning and breakfast would be served at seven forty five. All pupils must sit where they were supposed to sit as indicated and not to be changed around as they had been this evening. The message was duly noted and understood.

We returned to our dormitories to get ready for bed, during which time there was a considerable amount of excited chatter going on. Those "old boys" who knew the ropes, were giving us "new guys" instructions as to where everything was and what was expected of us. Soon, everyone was in bed and out went the lights. A little chatter continued but as one after the other fell asleep it got quieter and quieter until there was golden silence.

I lay there some time feeling a little homesick. The last occasion I attended boarding school it had had not been a happy experience but I was older now and didn't have any physical problems to cope with as before. Hopefully matters were to continue that way. Shafts of moonlight raked through the gaps in the curtains casting eerie shadows on the walls and floor. Then it started to rain creating a real commotion on the corrugated tin roof. Rain on a tin roof is quite a comforting sound to me and it was not long before I too was asleep.

At seven next morning Matron entered the dormitory informing us to get up, wash, dress and be ready for breakfast. It was a beautiful morning; the sun was shining and there was an air of happiness ringing in the dormitory. There was a mad rush to the bathroom, which quickly became full to overflowing. By some miracle the entire collection of nineteen boys were ready in time for breakfast. The girls took longer, of course!

It was eight fifteen before we were finished and the next job on our agenda was to make our beds. Pillow fights broke out until Matron arrived again. God, she was becoming a nuisance by putting a stop to our fun; shame, I was really enjoying that. There was then a bit of time before assembly, which was held at 9 o'clock each morning in the main hall where breakfast had been served. Some of us ventured out onto the play ground which had no proper surface but was a combination of red

clay and gravel, very hard wearing no doubt but a bugger if you fell over on it. The bell rang out to summon us to assembly in the main hall, which by now had been cleared of the dining tables. Do you know, that during my whole time at the school, I never knew who dismantled the dining room and set it up as an open hall or visa versa, funny that!

The teachers, among who was Miss Pringle, Miss Onion, pronounced Onion, Mr Jones and Sgt Fidler were now officially introduced along with Matron. They were lined up at the end of the hall and then Major and Mrs Harrison entered. Prayers were said and hymns sung. The Headmaster then gave us a run down on how the school would operate. This was mainly for the benefit of us new pupils. He delegated Mr Alan Jones to take care of the new recruits and show them around the school buildings, the sports field and the area, which was soon to become a farm. This was interesting and slightly scary because the school lay within a security fence, the sports ground and farm buildings were outside that perimeter.

Terrorist activity in the area was a threat and as much care as possible had been employed in an attempt to keep us safe. Mr Jones informed us that four Malay police officers would be guarding the school at night working in pairs, two on duty and two resting, working on a four hour shift pattern. In addition, their senior officer whose name was Augustine, who was as it happened was the younger brother of the Chief of Police in Tanah Rata

village. He could be seen around during the day and occasionally at night making sure that his instructions were being carried out correctly.

We were now taken back to the hall where the Headmaster once again addressed the entire school. He stressed that it was vitally important that all us children behaved ourselves and obey all the rules laid down by his staff. This was not just for usual behaviour but a matter of our safety. He explained that the need for this was that we were a small community in a foreign country and living in a fairly confined space with little communication with the outside world. He also reminded us that there were those who were very hostile towards the British. The Malayan Communist Organisation classified as terrorists for instance.

In those days it was not possible to pick up the phone and speak to ones family. It was a question of going to school and being isolated from everyone at home until the next holiday came round. Apart from writing letters that is which would have to be read by a member of staff before being mailed. This was to make sure that there was nothing in the letters which might compromise the security of the school. So it was important that we all got on well together and indeed it turned out to be a very happy school.

The ground rules of how the school would run were now perfectly clear to all pupils. The Head then read out each

pupils name and gave them a classroom number. Following that we had refreshments before going to our classrooms to meet our form master. My classroom was a little Nissan hut at the front of the school on the lower plateau below and to the left of the biology laboratory, a short distance inside the perimeter of the school grounds.

Miss Pringle was to be the form teacher of my class, which I was pleased about and she explained at length the terms programme, which was in place for this part of our school year. There were no textbooks available, as the Royal Army Education Corps (RAEC) did not have such things for children's education. All they had were specialised books for adult teaching, which were totally unsuitable for us. The substitute for textbooks was a stapled file of papers for each subject produced by the staff before term started and printed off on a Gestetner machine. The Gestetner duplicator was the first piece of office equipment that allowed businesses to make numerous copies of documents quickly and inexpensively.

For the teachers to draw up all the curricula for each subject and for each class must have taken an age and it did prove the level of dedication to their task. It was hard enough for the teaching staff to prepare the school buildings for occupation let alone be faced with this administrative difficulty on top of all that work.



The daily routine was much the same as at any other boarding school. Assembly in the morning, the lessons until lunch time. A few more lessons during the afternoon sometimes including a sporting event. After the schooling was basically finished it was followed by tea and finally evening assembly. I found evening assembly made me homesick but only because of the hymn which was often sung "The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended" I don't know why but I still feel emotional whenever I hear that hymn.

It was now that that the difference to other boarding schools became obvious. Due to the security being so necessary, no one was allowed out past the school perimeter and the pupils therefore had to be kept occupied within the confines of the school during leisure hours as well as during teaching time.

A whole array of activities had been set up among which were various clubs. Fencing, photography, model OO railway, (for the boys) farming, Girl Guides, Boy Scouts, Scottish dancing and a whole host of other activities. On various there was Scottish Reel dancing which included the sword dance. Mr Jones and Miss Pringle were the instructors. Most of the children were involved in pretty well everything and there was also time put aside for the playing of board games with ones closer friends. In addition there were a number of sporting activities. Football for the boys, hockey for girls and a general

smattering of athletics with a Sports Day held in April each year. I still have the medal I won in 1952.

The school had a facility for the safe keeping of "pocket money" which was mainly used in the Tuck Shop, which operated on a weekly basis. A couple of times during each term we would have a visit from the NAAFI van which one could purchase all sorts of things including toiletries, sweets, chocolate, toys, books, indoor board games and things like that. The NAAFI van was to visit later that day, a sweetener for what was to come before lunch.

An Army doctor from the British Military Hospital was seen walking across the quad and into the common room with his black bag. There, he and Matron were busy setting something out on the tables. Soon all the children and staff were lined up and were going to receive the dreaded TAB (Typhoid Vaccine) booster injection. Quickly I made up my mind that I was somehow going to get out of having the inoculation and made up a plausible story. My turn arrived and I said that I had my booster injection before coming to school when all my family were inoculated and I got away with it! Later on returning home Mum and Dad said that they had arranged for us all to have the booster jab and I quickly told them I had just had mine at school and got away with that too! I look back now and wasn't that bloody stupid thing to have done. I could have put others and myself at considerable risk. I have never been one to tell fibs; white lies possibly

and not even those very often but those injections were a right bastard!

Our school did have a worthwhile project and that was to adopt a blind baby girl called Maria. This baby was being cared for in an orphanage on the island of Penang. Looking back it amazes me that we relatively young children were so keen to help this little girl and give so generously to aid with her upkeep. All us pupils made small regular donations from their pocket money; it really was a great idea to give us a sort of social responsibility. All part of growing up to be fit and proper people. We were given regular updates on her progress, which continued to keep our interests in her well-being.

Shortly before the school closed on December 1964 the pupils at that time organised a fete to raise money as a farewell present for Maria. Major Harrison who had opened the school in 1951 had been invited by the Army to return to school to carry out the closing ceremony. Whilst there he was asked to travel to Penang to present the money raised by the fete to Maria, which totalled the magnificent sum of \$2000. Maria at this time was preparing to leave the orphanage to go out into the big wide world as a fully trained stenographer. A very rewarding exercise and something that I was very pleased to have played some small part in.

**End of Episode 2**

