

"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 4.

My First Night Out.

Back at school it would soon be time for dinner and it had been announced at morning assembly that in future there would be stars given for good behaviour at meal times and during school lessons in particular. One would also be able to gain stars for the quality of schoolwork. A record of who had earned what would be published and pinned up in the dining room each morning before assembly. I guess there had been some problems with some kids behaviour, perhaps even mine. The headmaster told us the 10 children with the most stars over two weeks would be taken on a treat on Saturday afternoons or evenings. My immediate reaction was that I wanted some of that. This evening was the start of the campaign and dinner was the quietest meal on record. It must have been very difficult for Miss Onion to make a choice of the best-behaved children to whom she would award stars. Before grace, expressing our gratitude for the dinner we were about to receive, Miss Onions read out the earners of the stars that evening and to my amazement I was one of them! Little blue eyed boy, what a start.

At assembly the next morning Major Harrison told us that the winners of the first "stars programme" to be held over the next two weeks would be taken to see a show at the Army Kinema Theatre which was located next to the BMH in Tanah Rata. That announcement caused great excitement and the battle was on to try to get a place among the 10 successful pupils. I just had to get there somehow. The Army using a 3-ton truck with the necessary guards aboard would provide the transport to and from the theatre. What a treat.

Later that evening there was a bit of a commotion when the Army unexpectedly arrived. Several vehicles poured into the playground area and disgorged lots of heavily armed soldiers from the Gordon Highlanders regiment. Apparently there had been some terrorist in the vicinity of Brinchang a small town about 3 miles north east of the school.

It was in that area there were two very large tea plantations and many vulnerable locals who did the tea picking. It was relatively open ground, as the tea bushes did not grow very tall which made the pickers fairly easy targets for the unforgiving terrorists. These evil people purely wanted to cause fear and panic among the local populace and to persuade these folk to give them food and shelter and keep them protected and out of sight. This would allow them to operate covertly in order to ambush the Malay and British forces and then dissolve

back in among the local populace making it almost impossible for them to be located.

One heard of many atrocities committed by this mindless regime but there was one act that will always haunt me. It is probably one of the most evil things one human can do to another. The Malayan Communist Party terrorists had carried out some terrible atrocities over the years but the action I will now describe has to have been the cruellest and vilest of them all.

The terrorists who infiltrated these small kampongs/villages would gather one or two little children, girls or boys, it didn't matter to them and brainwash these innocents to assist in the killing of Malaya and British troops. The children were not aware of what would ultimately happen to them. It was so dreadful. The technique was to tie string to the trigger pins of a hand grenade and form a loop. They would then tie the loop around the child's waist under their sarongs with the string trailing out behind them as the soldiers entered they kampong the terrorists would send the children to the troops asking for chocolate and sweets. At the appropriate moment they would pull the string, which pulled the pins out of the hand grenades. I need not describe the results of these actions. Fortunately these acts were not committed on many occasions as word quickly got out and soldiers kept a sharp lookout for

trailing string when people approached them. How can a human being do that to anyone let alone children?

Our troops who had just arrived at the school had been on an exercise trying to flush out the infiltrators of a nearby kampong and had called in to try to resolve a problem, which the school was having with our Malay police guards. The Headmaster and the other members of the school staff were not happy with the guards, two of whom had been found fast asleep by Mr Jones the previous evening whilst he took a stroll around the perimeter.

It was decided to deploy four soldiers armed with .303 Lee Enfield rifles and .303 Bren guns. These troops were to guard the school for the night and it would be reviewed on the following day. The Malay Police guards were returned to their headquarters. From then on there were only British soldiers guarding the school.

The troops who were sent up to the Cameron Highlands were usually convalescing following injury or illness. The air up in the hills was much cooler than on the plains, maintaining a steady temperature all year usually in the mid seventies Fahrenheit. It was an ideal temperature to help regain full health. In light of recent affairs they were only too glad to help and look after their valuable charges, after all we were just a bunch of army kids who needed protection. Having British soldiers guard us was a bonus as they spoke the same language as us. Having said

that, some of the Scots sounded foreign at times. They would tell us all sorts of stories relating to their soldiering experiences and explain how their weapons worked and how effective they were.

The next day I had a landmark, my twelfth birthday. Only 2 cards arrived, one from the school and the other with a small parcel from my parents and brother. At tea time the school had always asked the cook to have a small cake ready for such celebrations, a pleasant surprise for my first time around and made me feel more at home. Next year I would become a teenager and would have a bed in the senior boys dormitory. I really looked forward to that.

That evening the names of the 10 children with the most amount of stars was placed on the notice board in the common room. I was the last one on the list, only just made it but was pleased with myself. This meant that at the end of the week we were to go to the Army theatre at the convent (BMH) and see a show.

Saturday arrived and the ten of us winners were very excited with the thought of our special trip. There were 6 girls and 4 boys in the party, which tells you something. I guess that means girls are better behaved than boys, does it? At five o'clock the transport arrived and we along with Miss Onions and 2 armed soldiers as an escort, boarded the 3 ton Bedford truck which was to take us to Tanah Rata about 3 miles away. As we turned into the

convent, the driveway turned back on itself making it very difficult for the driver get around it in one go. A 15 cwt army pick up truck went through the opposite gates into the army base and clear to see, lying in the back of the truck were 2 bodies which appeared to be dead. One had several blood stains showing through the shirt on the left side of the torso and the other had blood all around the head. There was little doubt they were the bodies of terrorists. Our escort soldiers were concerned that we should have witnessed the scene and explained there had been a bit more terrorist's activity recently and no doubt the infantry had caught up with them in a successful exercise.

On entering the cinema we saw the Head and his wife were there to greet us and they had reserved seats in the front row for us. In the past I had only been to a cinema on a couple of occasions. On my 10th birthday my father took me to see *Morning Departure*, a film based on a true story about a British submarine, which was sunk in the Second World War. The film was shown at the Davis Cinema in Croydon. I remember being absolutely scared stiff, so much so that when it was half way through I decided to leave and go home on the bus and I left my Dad there.

This show was very different though and was simply light entertainment. It was fantastic and the first of its kind I had ever seen. Instead of the film I had expected to

see it was a live show starring artists from Blighty. There was Peggy Barnett, Shenna Howe and Odette Field. Musicians from the 1st Gordon Highlanders Regimental Band supported the show and the show consisted of singing, dancing and some comedy acts. Many of the songs were those made famous by Vera Lynn who spent a great deal of time entertaining troops during the recent war. She was commonly known as the Forces Sweetheart and highly respected by everyone.

Stars from home used to travel to many parts of the world to entertain our troops giving them temporary relief from their suffering. After all many of them had been in a war situation for a good number of years by 1951. The show was mainly for the soldiers serving in the Cameron Highlands and they must have enjoyed it as much as we did.

Next morning one of the children who was due on farm duty wasn't well and I was asked if I would help out and go down with the other 3 to make up the numbers. The morning shift did not usually take too long and I happily agreed to go with them. When we arrived at the hen house we noticed that one of the hens had a large swelling on its neck and it looked decidedly uncomfortable.

I was asked to run back up the hill and find a teacher to come and help. Finding Mrs Harrison our headmistress I explained our dilemma and she agree to come to the farm

with me to see what she could do to help. Mrs Harrison was mystified as to what was wrong with the hen and returned to the school to get advice from the fellow at the agricultural research centre. She called him and not long after the gentleman arrived with a vet and on examining the hen decided it had probably swallowed a snake. Picking up the frightened bird and holding it under arm the vet took a knife from his pocket and gently made a small cut in the hens throat and then proceeded to pull out the snake. With the help of Mrs Harrison and using some form of dressing he patched the bird up and released it. It flapped off and seemed none the worse for its experience. Incredible! Later in the day it was my turn to go to the farm on the evening shift and I found the hen looking fine and healthy.

Having finished our duties and returning to the school we cleaned ourselves and joined the rest of the school in the main hall for the evenings entertainment. They were already enjoying some Scottish reel dancing and soon I was called upon to partner one of the girls. I had no experience of dancing before arriving at Slim, let alone being with one of the opposite sex and I found myself feeling a bit awkward holding a girls hand. I had not had any practise at holding girls' hands and felt very shy, since I only had a brother back home and my cousins were lads bar one and she lived miles away and didn't see much of her at all.

It was 8 o'clock when the dancing ended. The Headmaster arrived with other teachers and informed us that we were going home on the following morning. Whilst we had been enjoying ourselves dancing the staff had taken our trunks to the dormitories and it was all systems go to get packing. The reason for such short notice of our leaving was simply a security measure so that there was little chance of anybody finding out that we would be on the morning convoy to Tapah Road. Clearly if the terrorists knew of us being in the trucks we would have been a valuable target for them to attack.

Thirty-eight happy and very excited children rushed to get the trunks packed and get a good nights sleep before our journey back home. Following breakfast we were called to morning assembly and given instructions as to which groups we were in so there wasn't a mad rush to crowd onto one vehicle. We were also told to use the bathroom before boarding the vehicles.

A fair number of us were set for a 2 day journey whilst others who lived in Penang and Kuala Lumpur were lucky, they only had a days travel ahead of them. The armoured trucks duly arrived at 8am prompt and it was time to go home. Yippee!. Once we were all aboard the engines fired up with a roar and we set off on our downhill journey. As we descended from the heights of the Cameron Highlands the temperature began to rise. After about 2 hours the convoy came to a halt and those who needed a

pee could do so. Not very private at the side of the road but the boys were better off than the girls. It was then back in the trucks and off we went again. Once we arrived at Tapah Road it was now very warm, up in the nineties and very humid. Not very pleasant after our time in the highlands. The convoy journey had been without incident, lucky really, because the escorting soldiers in our truck told us that the convoys had been attacked twice during the past week. Fortunately no one had lost their lives or been injured.

It was now time for lunch in the other ranks mess and then back on the trucks for the last part of the road journey. Arriving at the Tapah Road railway station we found the train had not yet arrived. We were ushered into the ticket office area where the escorting troops could keep an eye on us. After a short wait the train duly arrive and we boarded ready for the afternoon trip to Kuala Lumpur.

Having reached the Malaya capitol, our destination for the night we were met as usual by a convoy of army vehicles and transported to the army barracks where we were to spend the night before progressing our journey to Singapore by train. In the morning it was the same old routine, up early, breakfast, convoy to the station and a full day on the train down to Singapore. God that journey over 2 days was getting on my tits. My parents and brother met me in the railway station at dusk, 48 hours

after leaving the cool of the Cameron Highlands. Oh, I was so glad to be home but I had enjoyed my first term at Slim School immensely.

End of Episode 4