

"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 5.

The "Coffins"

Holidays are always too short for children and I was soon going to be on my way back to Slim School. A notice had arrived giving the date for return but this time the travel arrangements were very different. Instead of a day and a half by train, an overnight stop in Kuala Lumpur and then a 5 to 6 hour journey in an armed convoy we were to fly in a Dakota from Singapore Kalanga Airport in the middle of the city up to the town of Ipoh. Then an hour by convoy to Tapah Road for lunch at the army camp and then onward up by convoy to the Cameron's and Slim School.

The reason for the change was due to the fact that the terrorists had been attacking the trains during recent weeks. The risk to us to continue travelling by train were clearly too dangerous. The bandit's technique in disrupting train service was to blow up the railway track as the train passed by sending the locomotive and many of the carriages down into deep ravines. So, some good came out of bad for now we only had one day of travel

instead of two, which came as a relief to us all. The train journeys had been such a bore.

On the morning of the journey it was not such an early start as it had been previously as the flight only took an hour to get to Ipoh. Check in was quick due to the fact that there were so few aircraft flying in those days. There were not many international flights and they only hopped to nearby countries. There were internal flights but only two or three per day. I was so excited about my impending maiden flight. What a way to go to school.

Leaving home at nine thirty in the morning we arrived at the airport at about 10 am. We checked my trunk in and I said farewell to mother, father and my brother and it was time for me to board the plane with my school friends for the short trip ahead. I had a seat by a window on the left of the aircraft where I could see the terminal building, which was only about fifty yards away, and I could plainly see my family waving to me.

On the dot of ten thirty the twin engines fired up and soon the aircraft moved slowly from its standing area and began taxiing toward the runway. It turned at the end of the runway by the river and was to take off in an easterly direction, which meant I could see the terminal building and my family waving. The engines now picked up the revs and began to roar, the brakes were released and we were off down the runway. Bloody hell! there was such

a din and the plane was bouncing all over the place and suddenly we were airborne and on our way.

The plane banked left and passed over the infamous and notorious Changi Prison, the scene of so many atrocities committed by the Japanese Army against our hapless prisoners of war. The Japanese had captured our lads during the fall of Singapore and Malaya in the Second World War. Sadly, many died in the terrible conditions at the prison and many more who had been tortured.

Now turning north and gaining height we passed through some light cloud and could clearly see the island of Singapore and the Straits of Johore to the north which separated the island from the mainland of Malaya. From the air Singapore didn't look very big and in those days it was only about 20 miles north to south and a similar distance west to east. By now it is probably about 20% larger after land reclamation from the surrounding sea. One could see dozens of smaller islands surrounding the main island the largest being Sentosa lying to the south.

Now we flew close to the coastal town of Nesson the home of our Royal Navy base and then flew over Johore Baru. From then on we saw nothing much other than jungle below us, the occasional town and to the west the Straits of Mallaca. In the distance we could see Sumatra lying in the Indian Ocean to our west. After about an hour we passed to the west side Kuala Lumpur but I was on the wrong side to see the city. Then more jungle

before we began to descent in preparation for the landing at Ipoh airport.

As we dropped in altitude it became a little bit bumpy and we were instructed over the intercom to fasten our seat belts. Soon we were on our approach to the runway and descended gently until the wheels touched down with a hefty bump and we were safely on the ground once more, precisely on time at 12 noon. We taxied to the airport terminal building. This was a smaller building than the one at Singapore, tiny in comparison. Behind the terminal building we could see the army convoy lined up on the roadway waiting for us. There were six strange looking vehicles, similar to a modern mobile home with a sloping roof creating a gable along the main body of it and a forward sloping roof over the driver's cab. This was a variation we had not seen before. These weird vehicles were interwoven in the convoy.

Having alighted from the aircraft and entered the terminal building we met up with the rest of the children who had travelled down from Penang by train in the morning and the other children from Kuala Lumpur who had come up by train. They had not been waiting very long for us to arrive and we were all eager to get through the formalities in the terminal and find out from the soldiers what these strange vehicles were for.

The soldiers were already in the baggage collection area waiting for us to identify our luggage. This time the

troops were from the Manchester Regiment who had replaced the Gordon Highlanders who had returned to the UK their tour of duty completed. They took our luggage and loaded it on the trucks but were being delayed by the questions being fired at them by a bunch of very inquisitive youngsters. The Commanding Officer of the convoy was eager to get his vehicles on the move, as the longer the convoy was stationary the greater the risk of attack from terrorists. He asked the boys and girls to board the strange looking vehicles and leave our questions until we reached the military camp at Tapah Road, when they would have time to tell us everything we wanted to know. "Please get on the trucks, eight in each vehicle and no fighting, thank you".

We climbed in, eight children to each "mobile house" as instructed. Gosh it was hot inside them but once we were on the move and with the slots open around the sides of the vehicles the temperature did drop a little. There was one slot at the front over the driver's cab and three down each side and one in each of the back doors. Sticking out of the front slot was a Bren gun with a soldier sitting on a swivel seat. In the rear corners were soldiers with .303 rifles looking out the slots.

Having arrived at the depot we were taken to the canteen for lunch where there was great deal of excited chatter about the new type of truck in the convoy. One lad had established that they were called "Coffins".

Naturally we were all eager to find out why we were now in these very different vehicles.

With lunch completed the CO told us that we had 45 minutes to make ourselves comfortable and ready for the 5 to 6 hour journey which lay ahead up to the Camerons. Out of the hall we flew and off to the convoy to find out what we wanted to know from the soldiers.

During the holidays the convoys had come under frequent attacks and there had been a number of fatalities hence the need for a new special armoured personnel carrier. The reason the attacks on the convoys having been so successful were because the terrorists had obtained a few automatic weapons.

The soldiers had left the "Coffin" back doors open whilst we had lunch. This was a blessing as it was so hot now the open doors had certainly helped in keeping the temperature down inside the vehicles. It was explained that with the increase in terrorist activity it was decided to use the "Coffins" for the added protection they offered. The "Coffin" was constructed on a standard 3 ton Bedford truck chassis that had been fitted with a heavy-duty suspension. They had the benefit of being fitted with a fully armour plated floor, sides and roof. It had a gable ended sloping roof which prevented grenades or similar from lodging there and would allow them to roll off exploding harmlessly on the ground, the occupants being protected by the armour plating.

One of the soldiers in our vehicle explained the details about this armoured truck. "Now children let me tell you exactly what these trucks are for: Just below the sloping roof at the front, down the sides and in the rear doors, were these narrow slots and they are fitted with sliding armour plate covers. These slots have two functions: one to let fresh air into the vehicle and two, to allow escorting soldiers to use their weapons, firing through the slots if required. The slot at the front of the personnel carrying part of the coffin is located under the apex of the gable end of the roof and just above the near flat roof of the driver's cab. Within the vehicle at this point there was a revolving chair mounted on a pedestal. This was for the use of a soldier armed with a light machine gun, usually a Bren Gun, which could be very useful in protecting the vehicle and others in the convoy under an attack. In front of the driver and his co-driver were slots for ventilation with a bullet proof sliding glass cover to protect them in the event of attack, which allowed them to continue to drive on to an area of relative safety if possible. The sliding glass, which covered the slot, was four inches thick and would give the driver and his mate a reasonable amount of protection from a direct hit. The attacker would have to have been a very good shot to fire through such a small aperture with the type of rifles they were armed with. It enabled the truck to drive on, even if the tyres were shot up. This also gave the vehicle's driver a chance to proceed for a reasonable distance to safety. Now though the terrorists

have some automatic weapons so we have to take extra care, hence the new truck called the Coffin."

We now had to leave the trucks and gather outside the dining billet for an address by the Commanding Officer. At two o'clock we were called together and asked to get aboard the "coffins" for the awful hack up to the Camerons. Another five to six hours was spent punching our way up the twisting narrow road in these incredibly noisy vehicles, breathing the fumes they emitted and in some danger from the terrorists all the way up. The soldiers told us that a number of convoys had been ambushed in the preceding few weeks since our journey down some six weeks before. It was awful that there had been some fatalities and made us all feel a bit scared. Thankfully our journey was to be uneventful arriving at the school about seven in the evening and ready for the new term to start.

End of Episode 5.