

"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 6.

King George VI is Dead.

We had been back at school for about a month now and nothing out of the usual routine had occurred. However, on the morning of 7th February 1952 an assembly was about to commence. The headmaster usually wore civilian clothes but on that day he was dressed in his army uniform with a black armband on his left upper arm. He looked very sombre, as did the other members of staff lined up beside him. I didn't know the significance of the black armband but it was unusual for him to be wearing his uniform.

He began assembly by saying "Good morning children. In fact, it is not a very good one actually". For a moment he seemed to be gathering his thoughts and cleared his throat and in a slightly croaky voice announced that King George VI died in his sleep in the early morning of February 6th at Sandringham in Norfolk. The BBC had made the announcement at 10.45 am that day. He went on to tell us that the King was a mere 56 years of age and was in the sixteenth year of his reign. He explained that

the King had not been very well for some time and had undergone a lung operation some four months before his death, but the nation would still be very shocked by the sudden and rather unexpected sad news of his passing. Major Harrison informed us that the Accession Committee had announced that the King's eldest daughter, Princess Elizabeth, was now the heir to the throne and would be known as Queen Elizabeth II. She was to be crowned Queen at Westminster Abbey during the summer of the following year. The date for the coronation would be announced in a few days' time.

With the assembly completed, we were asked to go to the boys' playground where the flagpole was situated. The Head and Sgt Fidler had a Union Jack and raised it to half-mast in respect of the late King. The flag was to fly there for the next few days in his memory.

I knew that Dad's term of overseas service in Singapore would finish at the end of April or beginning of May 1953. It was possible that we might arrive home in England in time for the Coronation. In fact, we landed at Liverpool late evening of May 31st and travelled by troop train to London on the following day. Yippee! We were home just in time as the date for this historic event had been fixed for June 2nd, a close shave indeed.

My parents were true Royalists as I think most of the nation was in those days. During my young years I had always respected the Royal Family and have continued to

do so. I suppose it was part of one's education to be that way. The country as a whole seemed to be very supportive of the Royal Family during the war and it had seemed to continue after that time. I felt shattered by the news and very tearful as well, although I did manage to hold back my tears. I suddenly felt overcome with great panic, scared in fact, at the thought that we would now have a lady in charge of the country and that didn't seem right to me. In history lessons, I had only learned about past Kings in England and hadn't really taken too much notice that we had Queens as well. Indeed, it was only fifty or so years before that day that our country had had a person who was our Queen for sixty-four years, Queen Victoria, but that fact just didn't relieve my thoughts on this occasion in any way. Looking back as I write this entry in my diary, I suppose it was due to the recent happenings of World War 2. With the aftermath of all these military battles in various countries around the world, my entire life to date lay in a war scenario. It just seemed to me to have been natural to have a King in charge of the armed forces. After all, whenever my mother bought a newspaper there were usually articles about the King with pictures of him in his military uniform. Perhaps it was that which gave me the distress I now felt. It just did not seem to be natural for a lady to do that type of job.

Later that day, my class was to have a Current Affairs lesson in the afternoon in the art room, which would

usually be conducted by Mr Jones. It was obvious what the topic would be for that lesson. Mr Jones had used the time during the day to gather as much information as he could about what was going on back in England.

One has to remember that communication in those days was very slow. This lesson was one that I will always remember; it had the most marked effect on me. Mr Jones fed certain pieces of information to us and without exception all the children in the class were very attentive. He let the whole lesson run in a question and answer format, we asked the questions and he gave the answers, if he knew them.

The King's coffin was to lie in state and would be on view for all the public to see. Within hours of the King's death there were long queues of people forming, all awaiting the official opening of the process of "Laying in State". His coffin was to be mounted on a pedestal and covered with a "Union Flag", otherwise known as the "Union Jack". The King's crown would be placed at the head end of the coffin. At each corner of the pedestal there would be a soldier belonging to one of the Royal Household regiments guarding the coffin bearing our King's remains. Within the Hall there was to be a book of remembrance, which any of the King's subjects could sign. Many thousands of people were expected to pay homage in that way to the late King George.

Meantime, the new uncrowned Queen, Princess Elizabeth, was in Uganda with her husband Prince Philip. They were staying at a hunting lodge on a safari holiday, somewhere in the middle of the African bush. As I mentioned earlier, communications were slow in those days, particularly if one was in the middle of nowhere! It was to be some hours before the news reached the new Queen and her father's death would have been a dreadful shock for her. Arrangements had to be made to fly her and Prince Philip back to England as soon as it was practicable. She was flown in an aircraft of the Royal Flight from Entebbe Airport and had landed in London at 16.30 hours on 7th February. One can imagine that a good number of folks would be involved in getting the return home organised. Arriving back home, the Princess had to resume her life as our new Head of State, one very heavy responsibility for one so young. Not wasting any time she made her way to Sandringham to be with the rest of her family. So much had to be done. The arrangements for the King's funeral had to be finalised and after that, the long haul of arranging the Queen's coronation. Being in Malaya at the time of the King's funeral, all of us at school were unaware of the format it took and it was some time before news of it taking place filtered through.

Many of the children at the school were deeply affected by the Nation's loss and most of them were walking around with sadness spelled out on their brows. The teaching staff realising there was a problem set about

lifting us out of our gloom. Half term was almost upon us but of course no one went home. It was too far to travel. The logistics of getting us to and from for a week's holiday was just not viable. A visitor at the school who had been staying for two or three days came up with what turned out to be a brilliant idea. A "Wide Game". Sounds naff but this was to be no ordinary wide game, believe me. For a start, it began one afternoon and continued until late in the evening and then for the best part of the next day from early in the morning.

At assembly the Head announced that this event would take place on Friday after lunch and he expected everyone to actively take part, including teachers. There were to be ten attackers led by Mr Jones and they would be starting from the Cameron Highlands Hotel on the far side of the golf course about a mile and a half away. Their objective was to storm the School and endeavour to take it over. The Head would lead the rest of us and we had the task of defending the school. Sounds simple doesn't it?

Everyone would have a coloured woollen armband tied to the upper right arm. The colours denoting ones rank and each colour was given a point value. The defenders would have a Brigadier with a purple armband worth 10 points and privates with green armbands worth one point and other ranks with a variety of points. The attackers all

had red armbands denoting that they were the communist terrorists worth 10 points each.

The object of the game was to tear the armband off the opposing player and that rendered the player dead and would take no further part in the game. Those denoted as "dead" had to go to the school main hall to register. Any "dead" player who had retrieved an opposition armband would keep it in their pocket until the game was complete and it would then be handed in to an adjudicator.

The attackers would carry one hand grenade each worth 50 points if planted in one of the school buildings. These grenades were Players and Senior Service cigarette tins, which had previously held 50 cigarettes. They were filled with sand and the lids taped up. The attackers had to plant their grenades undetected in one of the school buildings, thus claiming the building and its occupants destroyed. The occupants had to hand their armbands over to the attackers and then make their way to the main hall. From memory the attackers only managed to destroy one boys dorm and the water tower, neither having defenders in them.

Now that everyone had been briefed and was wearing their armbands the attackers made off to their starting points and the defenders met in the main hall for our CO to delegate tasks to us and were sent to our allocated defence locations. Hostilities were to cease between 10pm and 6am. A girl and I were allocated to do a 2-hour

spell of guard duty on top of the water tower. Neither of us was keen on heights but proceeded to do our allocated task. We were to ensure that no one approached the school perimeter or the water tower, which was located at the back of the school next to the main hall, and it was a vital observation point for the defence of the School. We had been supplied with a pair of army issue binoculars to scan the surrounding area. Others were patrolling the perimeter and were similarly equipped

During our Scout and Guide activities we had been taught Morse code and were to communicate with our defenders on the ground with torches when it was dark. Our 2-hour stint came to an end and 2 fresh guards relieved us. Once on the ground we were told to make our way to the main hall where supper was ready. Our CO with military precision had put the duty roster together. He made sure that all of us were fed and watered and at the same time leaving sufficient guards to protect the school from the attacking force.

The attackers were to be catered for at the Cameron Highland Hotel and were expected to make a sortie or two on the school on the first evening under the cover of dusk with view to find out where our defenders were located, then to return to the hotel for supper and lay plans for a full scale attack at first light the next morning.

At about 7.45pm that evening our look outs on the water tower informed us by Morse code that they thought there were infiltrators on the footpath leading up to the school from the direction of the farm buildings located in the valley at the rear of the school. We heard the pigs grunting and squealing which was unusual at that time of evening and the lookouts had reasonably deduced that the animals must have been disturbed, most likely by the attacking force. We reported this to our CO who immediately deployed 2 patrols each made up by 5 children and a teacher.

The first patrol was to descend into the valley from the kitchen area and follow the attacking group up the jungle path towards the school whilst the second patrol made their way to the head of the path and hid under a school building. We now had everyone in place to ambush the infiltrators when they reached the summit of the path.

There were only 2 attackers who seeing the patrol emerge from under the building realised their plight and ran back down the path to escape only to run into the other patrol lying in wait. There was a short scuffle, the attackers were overpowered and armbands removed rendering them "dead". Of the 10 grenades issued to the attacking force 2 were recovered from the infiltrators, which reduced the attacking forces firepower by 20%.

Our CO was very pleased with us and then deployed his team of interrogators. They were to interrogate the

attackers to find out what their plans had been. After a while the interrogators had deduced that they were on a surveillance mission and were to report their findings back to their chief at the hotel.

Soon these guys would be missed and we therefore expected a search party to try to find out what had happened to them. The night went by but there was no further action around the school. It was now past 10pm, we decided that they were preparing for a major offensive at dawn still unaware of the locations of our look out posts. The school had been guarded overnight on a shift basis just in case the attackers broke the rules and attacked before the curfew was over.

By 6am, having breakfasted we were ready for a day of action. I had been posted to the water tower lookout and this time I had my special friend with me. She was in my class and we were really good pals. It was not very long before we got a sighting of the attackers. There were 4 of them down by the farm buildings crawling in the long grass up the bank towards the perimeter fence. We raised the alarm and very soon one of our patrols arrived to survey the situation. The attackers were quite close to the boy's dormitory and soon were in hand to hand fighting with our patrol.

The result of this skirmish was that 2 kids on each side lost their armbands. Unfortunately the other 2 attackers managed to plant their grenades in the senior boys

dormitory effectively destroying it and then managed to evade capture. In the meantime another 4 attackers had managed to infiltrate the school from the hockey pitch and successfully blown up the biology lab with 2 grenades and they too escaped. Now the attackers only had 4 grenades left.

When I visited the school in 2005 there were 2 of the original school buildings missing, the senior boys dorm and the biology lab. What a strange coincidence! They were apparently lost during a severe storm during the autumn months of 1999.

The last of the attackers made one final assault on the school. We had lost 8 of our guards in the various incidents but it was the value of the armbands seized that would determine the winners of this elaborate wide game. In the end the defenders won by a narrow margin. This diversion from the awful fact that our King had passed away had the effect of lifting the heavy cloud that had descended on the school, which was the purpose for which the wide game had been arranged.

News began to filter through from England about the coronation celebrations and was conveyed to us by Mr Jones in the periods set aside for current affairs. The ceremony of Queen Elizabeth's coronation was to be on the 2nd June 1953. That seemed to be a long time away but we began to realise that there were so many arrangements to be made. My family was due to return to

England at about that time and I just hoped we would be back home in time for the occasion.

The next point of interest in my diary was a visit by some forty girls who had travelled from their school in Mainland China. Their ages ranged from 11 to 16. It turned out that they were a choir doing a tour of Northern Malaya and had somehow made arrangements to visit us. They put on a wonderful show in the main hall and included a song "Rose, Rose I love you" This song sounded a little like an oriental tune and particularly so when sung by a Chinese choir. We in turn gave them a demonstration of Scottish dancing that we had learned during our evening free time. The sword dance was included for good measure and had been assigned to 3 others and me led by Miss Pringle and Mr Jones.

After the entertainment was finished we all sat down to a special "high tea" which the girls seemed to really enjoy. Fortunately these girls spoke very good English so it was easy to mix and exchange schooling experiences. We did learn a little bit about their culture and found they lived in a very different situation than ours. They were surprised to learn things about the way we lived. It seemed that China was a very strict country in those days and we had the feeling that these girls were envious of the way we lived. Our country is a democratic state and we are free to do as we want and when. Of course we have laws but they were reasonable rules by which we

lived and accepted by almost everyone. In China they seemed to be very much controlled by the state with many strict laws, which would seem unreasonable to us. Who is right would be debated forever but we must live and learn to respect each other's way of life and try to live as friends.

End of Episode 6.