

"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 7.

My First Stay in Hospital.

I woke up to a very sore throat and I felt dreadful. The Head boy had noticed something was very wrong with me and advised Matron. He told me to get back into bed as Matron was on the way to see me. She took my temperature and very quickly decided that I should be taken to the BMH at Tanah Rata and see a doctor. It was not very long before an army ambulance arrived with a nurse from the QARANC. I was speedily loaded into the antiquated ambulance and we were off to the hospital. We had not been travelling for long nor at a rapid pace when we came to a very sharp bend the ambulance braked violently followed by an almighty crash and we were brought to an abrupt halt. An old civilian vehicle coming from the opposite direction had traversed the centre line and crashed into the front of the ambulance causing minor damage. The RASC driver radioed for assistance just in case the accident was staged. Meantime the nurse stayed with me in the back of the ambulance. Within a few minutes a Dingo scout car arrived to assist us. The armed fellow in the turret jumped down and with the

ambulance driver checked for damage to the vehicles. It turned out that the driver of the civilian truck was known to the crew of the Dingo scout car. He was an employee of a local tea planter. They ensured the truck driver was not injured and that he got assistance in getting his vehicle back to the plantation. Thankfully the damage to the ambulance was minor and we continued our journey to the BMH with the Dingo scout car as escort.

On arrival I was taken to the accident and emergency ward to be examined by the duty medical officer. I was by now feeling really unwell. After an examination the duty doctor decided I should be admitted and diagnosed with a severe attack of tonsillitis, a high temperature and headache. I had never been in hospital before and this was a new and unwanted experience and I did not know what to expect.

I was taken to a ward in which there were 11 soldiers of the Manchester Regiment and I made up the round dozen.

The soldiers in the ward had been on patrol when terrorists, some armed with automatic weapons ambushed them. Apparently it was the first time British troops had come under automatic fire whilst on patrol in Malaya. It was not known how the terrorists had acquired these weapons and it was a concern to senior military personnel.

Of the 12 man patrol only one member escaped injury but the remaining soldiers were injured in one way or another. Some had legs plastered and in slings attached to pulleys fixed to poles attached to the bed frame, others had arms in plaster stuck up in the air and some had body wounds. Thankfully none died or were seriously wounded.

I was very depressed and unhappy with my situation. One 13 year old among a ward of adults, 400 miles from my family and feeling bloody awful. After a week of very painful penicillin injections administered to my backside I was allowed out of bed but only to go to the bathroom.

There had been a commotion during the afternoon in a ward further up the corridor. I needed to go to the bathroom, which was on the other side of the ward from which all the noise had come earlier on. On entering the bathroom I saw a horrific sight.

There were blood soaked clothes strewn all over the tiled floor. The whole room was awash in a claret ocean of some poor buggers blood. I did what I had to do and rushed back to my ward. I told the soldier in the next bed what I had seen which seemed to shock him. He called over some of the mobile patients to tell them what I had seen. Off they went to survey the scene. Great guys they were as they offered to help the nurses clean the place up. The nurses had been too busy earlier as they were sorting out the fellow who been shot.

Ironically, the chap who had been shot, had been shot twice at close range in the lower back, then tied by his ankles and strung upside down in a tree, there left to die. He was a Malayan tea planter who worked at the very same tea plantation that the truck driver who crashed into the ambulance earlier worked for.

I learned a few days later that a patrol from the Manchester Regiment had finally caught up with this terrorist group and killed or captured them all. These terrorists are typical of their type, cowardly as they don't wear a uniform and that enables them to mingle with the general public. As a result the villager who just want to get on with their lives in peace were subject to all sorts of atrocities. These villagers were forced into hiding these wretched terrorists. There were occasions when they were able to tip off the soldiers as to the terrorist's presence among their society, which aided the troops to dig them out and deal with them.

When I was feeling a bit better but still supposedly confined to bed a company of British entertainers arrived to put on a show for the troops in the army cinema next to the hospital. I wanted to go to the show but the duty-nursing sister told me I was not well enough and must stay in bed. I was gutted at the news and hid under my bedclothes in tears. Big boys of 13 must not be seen to be crying, must they? Gosh, I was so depressed and fed up with life.

A few of the injured soldiers in the ward were now getting about. The 4 or 5 who were reasonably well, realising that I was pretty fed up hatched a plan for me to go to the show with them. At the appropriate time, they wrapped me in a blanket, stuffed pillows down my bed and shaped them to make it look as if I was still sulking under the bed covers and whipped down the corridor with me over the shoulder of one of them. Into the cinema we went and straight to the back row where two others from the ward had bagged some seats for us. I was by now giggling with excitement at my excursion and sat back to enjoy the show. It was due to start in a few minutes and just before the house lights went down, one of the guys went off and returned with bars of Kit Kat, including one for me, which was a real treat. When the show ended, we left the building to make our way back to the ward but instead of returning right towards the ward, we turned left which led to the stage door. Unbeknownst to me, during the interval, one of the guys had slipped off and gone to the stage door to make arrangements for me to meet the stars, who were going to sign an autograph book for me, which another of the soldiers had purchased from the NAFFI. This evening had been a wonderful experience and a real uplift to my spirits. I will always be grateful to those members of the Manchester Regiment who took such good care of me and so generously.

Unfortunately, the evening ended on a sour note, for whilst we were at the show, the duty Sister discovered that I was missing and that I had been represented by a heap of pillows. The chaps, who had been left in the ward because they were immobile, had pleaded with her to turn a blind eye, but not her. She told the guys that their mates had been totally irresponsible and she would have them put on a charge in the morning.

When we arrived back in the ward, she lambasted the fellows who had been so kind to me. I pleaded with her to let them off because they were only trying to cheer me up, which they had succeeded in doing but she was having none of it. Fortunately, when she arrived next morning she had had a change of heart and did not have them charged for which everyone was most grateful, although she did give them another good military style bollocking.

The next day I felt so much better which was clearly due to me having my spirits lifted by going to see the show. My ward mates were fine now that they basically had been let off but following a peaceful day but our evening was about to be rudely interrupted. Soon after the ward lights had been turned out at around 10 o'clock pandemonium broke out. There was a tremendous amount of gunfire that sounded as if it was coming from somewhere quite close to the hospital. For a short while there was an eerie silence and then there was a second deafening volley came in, which resulted in bullets

smashing through two of our windows, screaming across the room and screwing themselves into the wall at the back of the ward. Fortunately, they did not penetrate the wall and into the corridor where a team of nurses and doctors were chasing up and down trying to get all the patients to stay calm.

Those soldiers, who were not bedridden, tipped me off my bed and stood the mattress up against the side of the bed frame thus giving me some protection from any ricocheting bullets. They told me to roll against the bed and to stay there. With me sorted, they then went to help the guys who were not able to get out of bed. Moving deftly across the floor to the beds where their more seriously injured chums where they carefully took them from their beds and gently slid them underneath complete with the ironmongery, pulleys, ropes and all. Another volley came blasting into our ward much louder than before. These bullets were fortunately entering at such a height as to pass harmlessly over our beds and again slamming into the wall at the rear of the room.

Suddenly six soldiers came flying into the ward, armed to the teeth with an array of weapons. Crouching as low as possible they made their way towards the windows. With the lights having been turned out, I noticed that the moon was high in the night sky, which shone brightly through the smashed glass into the ward. The troops told all of us patients to remain on the floor for a while to be

sure the attackers had either fled, or in some cases been killed or immobilised. They had identified that the attackers were located on the hill not too far away from the hospital. I heard them say that the terrorists were about some four hundred yards away, too close for comfort! After five minutes or so of quiet, shooting began again but it was more distant now and not threatening the hospital. The armed chaps by the windows reckoned that it was their mates who were doing a clean-up operation from either flank of the area from where the attack had come from. Blankets were now put up over the windows so that a limited amount of lights could be put on. This enabled the nurses to check on some of the already seriously injured folk still in heaps under their beds and to be sure that they were all OK. They of course had to be got back into bed and have their elaborate rigging reassembled which took a while.

Meantime, the walking wounded soldiers began another clean-up operation to get rid of the shattered glass strewn across the floor in a display of sparkling flashes, simulating many carats of diamonds. I was gently advised to stay put until they had cleared up the mess and made the floor safe to walk on.

A few days later, I was feeling much better and allowed to get dressed and wander around the hospital. Late one afternoon the Headmaster and his wife paid me a visit, which was the second time they had been into see me.

This time, I was excitedly telling them of the attack to which they listened patiently. After I gave them a chance to get a word in edgewise, they were able to talk to me about the reason for their visit. How was I feeling? Had anyone told me when I could return to school? Would I like to go home?

That last question really grabbed my attention, "would I like to go home - like hell I would". The Headmistress left, leaving Major Harrison and me alone. He was gentle and had many kind words of encouragement for me. I should look forward to the future and not dwell anymore on the past. That short discussion had done much to lift my spirits and when his wife returned with more exciting news, I was up on cloud nine. The earlier question, "would I like to go home", which I had answered positively, gave them the response they had been hoping to hear.

His wife had established from the Doctor and Sister that if I felt well enough, I could leave hospital and go back to school with them this evening. The end of term had arrived and the convoy would be coming to the school in the morning and take us kids to Ipoh for the flight back to Singapore. I said my hurried good byes to the guys who had done so much for me as well as the Doctor and nurses. Then it was off downstairs and into the Harrison's new Morris Minor for the journey back to school. During my stay in hospital, Matron had all my clothes laundered and was going to help me pack

everything into the old ammo box, which was still being used as my school trunk. Then, feeling completely knackered after the excitement of the last couple of hours it was time for bed.

After a good night's sleep and whilst waiting for the convoy to arrive at the school, I had a group of mates around me wanting to know if I knew anything about the attack on the hospital. Blimey you lucky sod, wow, really and many other utterings of amazement were being expressed as I told them the story. "You lucky little bugger" one exclaimed, "wish I'd been there".

Soon after eight thirty in the morning a part of the convoy arrived and our luggage was packed into a three ton Bedford truck and we children were loaded into the Coffins. As we boarded, the soldiers told us that they convoy had been attacked on the previous afternoon, so there may or may not be a comfort break on the way down to the Taper Road, "Boys and girls if you need to go to the loo, go now, was the instruction on all the Coffins. A few kids got off but were soon back and safely on board.

A few minutes later all the vehicles started up with a great roar and with fumes billowing in the air it became very smelly. The radios were crackling, busy with instructions to the drivers and escorts and off we went.

It was only a few miles later when we passed through the local town of Tanah Rata and onward down the winding road through the jungle for the next five hours or so. It took as long to go down the hill as it did to come up it. Being quite steep in places the drivers had to use lower gears and brakes a great deal to stop the vehicles running out of control. The brakes used to get very hot and you could smell them.

We did get a comfort break after all, in the small town of Ringit. It was a welcome relief just to get out of the Coffins for while because it was getting hotter now we were in descent from the Cameron's. Up at the school the temperature was in the mid seventies by day and now it was humid and mid eighties.

By the time we reached the army base at Tapah Road it was back to the mid nineties and very humid. It was now two thirty in the afternoon, just in time for a light lunch before we were on the road again to Ipoh to catch our flight to Singapore. Others had to get the train to Kuala Lumpur and the smallest group continued in the convoy from Ipoh to Penang.

The journey was uneventful and having been safely delivered to Ipoh airport we could see the Malayan Airways airplane parked and waiting for us. The soldiers took the luggage from the three-ton truck and it was loaded onto the Singapore plane. Unfortunately, it started to pelt down with rain and as we approached the

aircraft we got soaked through. No one cared about being damp because it dried quickly. Once aboard, the door was closed, the order came over the tannoy to fasten our seat belts and we were soon on our way.

As it was still raining and there was heavy cloud, we were unable to see land at all during the journey. Time seemed to pass quickly and as we descended and broke through the cloud, we could clearly see the island of Singapore. Within a few minutes we were coming into land at Kalang airport. In the distance I could see my parents and brother just outside the terminal building waiting for me. Oh! I was so glad to be back home after a very eventful term at school. It was so good to see my family again and I was really looking forward to being home for the long holiday. Unfortunately this was not to be.

After a couple of weeks I began to feel unwell and I was taken to see the doctor. After a thorough examination he pronounced that I had contracted Hepatitis! I was whipped off to hospital *AGAIN!* I spent several weeks in hospital and a couple of further weeks at home recuperating before being well enough to return to Slim.

I finally went back School 5 weeks late but this time I flew in an ambulance Dakota. The aircraft seats were more like hammock style seats and faced backwards, a weird sensation flying like that.

The aircraft was transporting soldiers who had been wounded in the fighting or had been ill. They were being transferred to the cooler climate of the Cameron Highlands for respite care after being in hospital. Once fit they would return to their various military units.

Once we arrived at Ipoh airport we travelled under escort to the to Tapah Road to join a convoy destined for Tanah Rata in the Highlands and eventually to Slim.

It was quite late when I finally arrived at Slim and Eve Pringle the teacher on duty greeted me. She took me through to the staff dining room for some supper and it was a tradition English fried breakfast!! This unfortunately was off limits, as I had to follow a strict diet as laid out by the hospital. Giving Miss Pringle the letter from the hospital my fried breakfast vanished to be replaced by a salad! Not my favourite but it was enough at that time of night and then it was off to bed.

During the holidays I had decided to join the school fencing club and model railway club. These would compliment my farm club and boys scouts. I was also taking confirmation classes. The Bishop of Singapore would be officiating having been invited by the Headmaster. Fencing became a favourite of mine specialising in the foil, as the epee was too heavy for me. I was quite good and I won my age group cup at the end

of term. All the activities gave me a great deal of satisfaction and a feeling of accomplishment.

End of Episode 7.