

"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 8.

The School and Convoy Are Attacked.

After a request from the Head my father sent an old Jeep up to school to be used for a vehicle maintenance project. This quickly became a very popular project and many pupils' girls included wanted to be involved. Mr Jones was assigned the task of leading the project. A large crate of spare parts, tools and body panels had also been sent with the Jeep.

By half term we had stripped everything off the chassis, cleaned it and rust proofed it and then painted it with special metal paint. We then reassembled it except for the body panels and seats. That would be a job for next term.

One night part way into term we were woken by gunfire. I remember that I had been dreaming of Just William a schoolboy character created by Richard Crompton. In my dream he was walking down the street whistling, that whistling was in fact coming from a bullet that made a loud thud as it ripped into the corrugated tin roof of our dormitory, that's what I thought at the time. A few

moments later there was a sudden deafening burst of automatic fire from the Bren gun sited on the path outside my window. The guards thought they had seen a light in the jungle behind the farm building and they assumed that was where the shot had come from so they returned fire.

None of us boys panicked. We were all peering over the windowsills trying to get a look at what was going on. One of our teachers Mr Jones appeared at the dorm door and chivvied us away from the windows and told us to get down and crawl to the main hall. It was pitch black. We arrived at the main hall to find everyone else present and lying on the floor.

A teacher completed an almost silent roll call. Some of the younger children were sobbing and were being consoled by older pupils and teachers. The teachers were armed with pistols just in case the terrorists managed to breach the school perimeter. Gradually the hall became quiet as the crying stopped.

Suddenly there was a shot that seemed to come from the direction of the boy's dorm. One of the staff crawled to the window on the boy's dorm side of the hall to see what was going on. It turned out that Augustine the Malay Police Officer armed with a .22 automatic carbine had shot a person running across the playground in front of the girls dormitory heading toward the main hall assuming he was an infiltrator. It turned out the infiltrator was

the schools chief cook Sim Yap Seeng. He had been shot in the leg.

After about 20 minutes an ambulance arrived at the school supported by a heavily armed troop escort and transported Mr Sim to hospital in Tanah Rata. Shortly after another truck arrived with more soldiers whose task was to make their way down into the valley to try to find the attackers. No further shots were fired and it was deemed safe for us to return to our dormitories.

The following morning at assembly the Head explained there had not been terrorist attack after all but a few fireflies had landed on leaves reflecting light back towards the school, which simulated torchlight. The soldiers taking no chance had opened fire and as there had been no return of fire it was deemed all was well and that no attack had taken place. I'm not sure that all of us believed that explanation!

The day passed with no further problems but at about midnight we were again woken by the deafening burst of automatic gunfire from beside our dormitory. Once fully awake which did not take long with the noise we were very excited by this action and were again looking out the windows assuming this was another false alarm. We were able to see the tracer bullets arcing through the sky as the soldiers fired down into the valley. Suddenly a voice bellowed at us to get down on the floor and make our way to the main hall, NOW! Blimey it was Jonesy again.

The following morning I was on farm duty and making my way to the kitchen found it full of soldiers enjoying a morning cuppa. Being ever inquisitive we wanted to know what the shooting had been about. It would seem that a couple of off duty soldiers had been out on the town and returning to their barracks had been challenged by a guard and had not responded. Being rather touchy from the previous nights activities the guard opened fire, which in turn prompted the school guard to open fire as well. Luckily the revellers were not hit but would end up on a charge for being absent without leave.

Soon it would be time to return home for Christmas holidays and this would be my last yuletide in the far east as we would be travelling back to the UK in about 6 months time. This meant I would have only one more term at Slim, which made me feel a little sad, as I had had a really great time at Slim.

About 2 weeks before Christmas we had the announcement just before dinner that we would be going home the following day. We were told to go straight to our rooms and prepare our possessions for packing when our trunks arrived. We were all hungry and excited about going home so packing was not that tidy, in fact most stuff was just chucked in. Job done the bell went for dinner and a mad dash was made for the dining room. After dinner we were told lights out would be 9pm as we had an early start and a long journey ahead of us.

Reveille was at 6am, earlier than usual with breakfast at 06.30. During breakfast we were told that the convoy would leave an hour earlier than usual at 07.30, as they wanted to be able to make the ongoing connections for the remainder of our journeys.

At 07.15 there was the familiar roar of engines and fumes all around. We were instructed to board the coffins in an orderly manner. Once aboard the soldiers told us that the convoys had been attacked recently and reminded us to follow all instructions as we had on previous journeys. We left on schedule making our way through Tanah Rata noticing how quiet the town was with no shops yet open.

We entered the base to join up with the rest of the convoy. We noticed a lot of heavily armed soldiers. I asked one of them if the convoys had been attacked recently and he said yes and that was why there were more soldiers than usual travelling with the convoy.

With the 30 vehicles convoy now formed the order was given to start engines and the sound was almost deafening and the fumes made many of us cough. The order was given and the convoy began to slowly roll out of the camp. Our guards told us we would be stopping for a comfort break earlier than usual. The convoy commander had decided to change the routine in an attempt to make the journey safer. We would not be stopping in Ringit but at an area that did not have the high rising jungle at the

rest area. We were advised that when we stopped to get out and do what we had to do because we would not be stopping again until Tapah Road.

Down the hill we proceeded and eventually into a very twisty and steep part of the road. All seemed to be proceeding nicely when suddenly firing erupted. The support aircraft immediately began dropping grenades or similar on the slopes ahead of us. We were trapped in a hairpin bend. We were clearly under attack and there was some chaos for a few minutes. We saw troops from the rear of the convoy running down the road towards us with some climbing the banks and heading into the jungle. We were told to come away from the slots in the side of the coffin and then our guard armed with a Bren gun starting firing. The noise and smell were awful. Another Bren opened fire from ahead of us. The firing from the jungle seemed to cease after a short while but shots were still heard up in the jungle. Our guards told us that the troops who had gone into the jungle must have engaged with the terrorists and soon we would probably be able to continue with our journey.

From the bench I was sitting on I could see a couple of army vehicles coming down the hill from the rear of the convoy. As they went past I asked the soldier where they were going. He told me they had stopped at the vehicle in front of us, as there were two wounded soldiers in the

vehicle. Two QARANC sisters arrived and attended to the wounded soldiers.

After the soldiers were transferred to another vehicle the order was given for the convoy to proceed leaving behind the soldiers who had earlier gone into the jungle. They would be picked up by the upward bound convoy later in the day.

Nearly all of the children had done this journey a number of times without incident but this time it had been an unpleasant experience. We learned later that one soldier had died from his injuries; the other had been shot in the foot. I felt a little unnerved by this attack and hoped we would be free from another attack on the rest of our journey down the hill.

We arrived at Tapah Road just before 1pm and lunch was waiting for us. There was a lot of chatter around the lunch table about the attack but we in the coffin knew more of what happened to the truck that had been hit as it was just in front of our coffin. After lunch some of us went to look at the vehicle that had been hit and it was clear that a bullet that had gone through the radiator and into the truck hit the driver. The soldier who had died was hit by a bullet that had gone through the windscreen and hit him in the stomach. There was a lot of blood in his part of the truck.

Our group now broke up and we headed off in our various directions. My group headed for Ipoh where I boarded a Malayan Airways plane and soon was back home in Singapore. Once more safely into the bosom of my family.

My Last Term at Slim.

Christmas came and went and I was eagerly awaiting word on when I would go back to Slim and it arrived on the 4th of January. I was to be at the airport on the 6th January at 11am. It was now time to start packing my trunk.

As this was to be my last term at Slim I found it saddened me. Not many children of my age had experienced what I had. I had arrived as a young boy of 11 and there were times when I was a bit scared and a bit homesick on occasions. Now I was a person who could look after himself and with a confidence that was way above that expected of my age of almost fourteen.

The journey to school was now old hat having done it a few times and we arrived at school in the pouring rain and freezing temperature compared to the 90f degrees we had left behind down on the plains but we were in time for supper a typical military job of sausage, baked beans and mash spuds. Better than nothing.

The following morning I was charged with looking after a new boy who was a year younger than me who came from north London. He had never been to boarding school and

was a bit anxious but soon settled down and became involved in the many school activities.

It was decided that we would hold a Gang Show to be held in honour of our Headmaster and Headmistress Major and Mrs Harrison. Like me they were soon to return home and the Staff and pupils wanted to celebrate the wonderful work they had accomplished during their tenure at the school. They had been instrumental in starting the school in 1951 with no educational supplies, no textbooks, no writing materials, syllabus etc. They managed to obtain a Gestetner copier and they and the staff produced all the teaching manuals along with preparing the accommodations, classrooms, dining room, kitchens etc. before the first pupils arrived. It was a mammoth task.

The show was to be staged in the Army Kinema building in Tanah Rata. It was great fun rehearsing the show. However the final dress rehearsal nearly ended in tragedy. A soldier who was fixing a spotlight, which was faulty, unfortunately was stood in a puddle of water left over from a rain shower and there was a blinding flash and he was thrown across the stage. Fortunately he was not seriously hurt.

The following day was the official performance. When we arrived at the Kinema we were surprised to find there were lots of snacks laid out for us. Once we had eaten we

went backstage to prepare for the show. The show was a great success and enjoyed by all.

The term seemed to rush by and suddenly it was my last day and I felt very tearful. Saying goodbye to the staff was wrenching as was later saying goodbye to my fellow pupils when we left each other at Tapah Road and Singapore airport. We had been such a close unit and obviously got to know one another very well. It was an incredible experience for one so young and something I have never forgotten. Often my mind has cast back to those times long ago and I realised how important a part of my life it had been. I am so grateful to all those who I met there and I will never forget those wonderful times at Slim School.

A pupil from Slim School.....