

POINT HUT

In which Eastgate recalls the welcome that wasn't...

NO one who has ever smelled the aroma which is uniquely Army Q-Store can ever forget it. It is a primeval combination of old wood, leather, cotton drill, wet wool, preserved canvas, oil, tar and rope, with just a hint of Army blanket. It is a dusty, musty, damp smell which permeates every corner of every Army store and everything stored within.

It inhabits clothing stores, armouries, engineer stores and the cupboards in which the PTIs keep their assorted instruments of torture. It brings back memories of great campaigns and of the far flung fields and corners of Empire in which soldiers have served: Waterloo, Gallipoli, the trenches of France, the Western Desert, New Guinea, Vietnam, Point Hut.

We were taken to Point Hut, Changi by the Murrumbidgee, by Army bus. Our kit bags into which we had stuffed those essentials which we had been directed to bring, as well as a few things which had been directed not to bring, were thrown into the back of a lorry. We would soon become accustomed to this ritual of separating us from our belongings for travel. Our webbing and our rifles we carried with us in the bus. We would quickly become inseparable from these new found tools of trade.

Long used by the College for field training, Point Hut belonged to the Gullett family. The elder Gullett, Sir Henry, a Cabinet Minister, had been killed in an air crash during final approaches to Canberra airport during World War 2, along with the CGS Brudenell-White and the Minister for Aviation, Mr Fairbairn, in whose memory the air base was renamed RAAF Fairbairn.

Gullett's son Jo, the present squire, was a decorated World War 2 officer who had followed his father into Federal politics. He later wrote an account of his war time experiences, "Not as a Duty Only" which became something of a text for aspiring young officers. We wished that he had written a guide to Point Hut.

Point Hut's primary function was as a sheep station. Sheep are bred primarily for their wool, which is relatively useful and for their meat, which is a vastly over rated comestible whose sole benefit is as an accompaniment for baked potatoes, gravy, mint sauce and peas.

Sheep are also a willing host for small, black flies, a pestilence for which Canberra and its environs were renowned during the summer months. They swarmed around exposed body parts, alighting, biting and annoying and resisting all attempts at being repelled save for the application of clouds of Aeroguard. So plentiful were these pests that we constantly swatted at them, quickly adopting a gesture which had come to be regarded as the National Capital's salute.

Point Hut was also a popular picnic spot for the citizens of Canberra, who seemed to derive some perverse pleasure from having these same pests share their feasts, spoil their drinks and attack their bodies.

Point Hut's vegetation consisted of long, dry grass and a number of gum trees, which added their own Australian touch. In the careless manner of gum trees everywhere, they shed their leaves, bits of their branches and other foliage all about the dry, hard, rocky ground.

The dusty odour of dry grass, the faint redolence of gum trees mingled with the omnipresent essence of Q-Store and Aeroguard plus the overriding stale smell of the ubiquitous, small, black, disintegrating pellets which are the unmistakable sign that sheep have passed this way, are the lingering, olfactory images of Point Hut.

On arrival we were met by a stocky, ruddy, red headed apparition with a long stick under his arm who yelled at us as we poured off the buses, "Welcome to Point Hut!" Seldom, it was to seem, had the words been used with such insincerity. Welcome indeed!

We quickly discovered that the gentleman's name was Warrant Officer Class 2 Brian W Foster, known for the obvious reasons to his mates as "Bluey." We were not invited to call him such and it was made very clear that we could call him "Sir." "Not "Sah." Sir!

We also discovered very quickly that Sir yelled a lot, and he was very good indeed at yelling. To those unfamiliar at that stage with the military hierarchy it also became very obvious that Sir was the senior sidekick to a bloke whose improbable name was Fred Pfitzner, a tall laconic fellow who although he was a graduate, had not done Fourth Class. With hindsight, it showed.

Not doing Fourth Class seemed like a perfectly acceptable option, but it was not one which Pfred was willing to extend to us. Pfred was a Captain soon to be Major, and was the commander of the ad hoc organisation which was set up to run Point Hut in 1968. He was also a Sir, and even though he was more important than Sir Bluey, we didn't see as much of Sir Pfred as we saw of Sir Bluey.

Maybe it was because he was more important that we didn't see as much of Sir Pfred. Maybe it was just because it was Pfred.

The first thing many cadets had to learn was how to wear a uniform. Not all had previously been members of the Australian Cadet Corps during their secondary school years, so that such mysteries as which canvas gaiter belonged to which foot had not yet been revealed to them. Those of us who were more worldly about such basic military matters knew that the straps were worn on the outside of the leg.

Putting the left gaiter on the right leg and vice versa, so that the straps and buckles were on the inside of the leg meant that when one tried to march (we no longer walked anywhere!) the buckles would briefly snag, so that the wearer clicked when he walked. In an extreme case they might actually lock so that one might actually fall flat on one's face, adding the taste of dust and sheep poo to one's sensory experiences.

We were visited soon after our arrival by the college barber, a young National Servicemen who owed his professional qualifications to the fact that both his parents were hairdressers, and being the barber at Duntroon seemed to him a better option than going to Vietnam. He had volunteered and was learning as he went along. Some of the new cadets, vanity overriding practicality, preferred to err on the side of fashion. Given the skills of the barber, it was not the wisest choice.

Joff Johnson, who came from a line of aggressive males addicted to contact sports and surf lifesaving, opted for a No 1 all over crew cut. A very practical stubble resulted. Being next in line, I boldly volunteered to have 'the same as him.' I had not then seen the hidden details of my scalp exposed to public scrutiny, though it is now a familiar sight. The time saved not having to wash my hair nor to waste precious seconds combing it into place later proved that my impetuous decision was wise.

We were to be housed in World War 2 vintage Army marquees. There were four from memory, to which we were allocated by military half Class, so there would have been about twenty five of us in each elongated tent. Four 1 consisted of the cadets from Alamein and Gallipoli Company while Kokoda and Kapyong made up Four 2.

We each had an Army issue stretcher on a duck board floor. There is a knack to assembling the stretchers, and we would shed much skin from our knuckles while we mastered it. Our worldly possessions, or at least those which we had been permitted to bring with us were kept in a kit bag at the head of our bed, or rested upon the stretcher during the day. A small D-shaped brass hasp and a padlock secured our possessions from inquisitive hands and eyes. Were there natives abroad?

Another marquee served as a mess tent, serviced by a field kitchen. We dined from wooden FS tables, seated upon folding, wooden forms. We rinsed our dixies and knives, forks and spoons in large galvanised basins on a table outside the mess, rinsing them in hot water before and after use, in the approved manner of soldiers for many generations. The omnipresent dust settled on everything.

We bathed in the river when permitted, but performed our daily ablutions in field showers fed from a header tank serviced by an engineer sapper, whose role it was to provide hot water from the potable water delivered daily from the river by tanker. Privacy was the least consideration, and these showers were open to the world.

A fifteen holer pit latrine serviced other essential needs, supposedly deep enough to prevent the flies from making our lives any more miserable than they already did. Atop each position was a conical, black metal thunder box, with a green painted seat and lid.

Again, privacy was not a major consideration in the construction of this most necessary of edifices, which proved a severe trial for those cadets who had hitherto performed their daily evacuations alone and behind closed doors. One learned quickly to perform one's necessary functions in full public view and under the embarrassed scrutiny of one's fellow cadets. After a while some became so bold as to engage in conversation, albeit conversation punctuated at odd intervals by strained grunts.

Only the instructors were allowed the privacy of a screened cubicle to shield them from the cadets prying eyes. Was it possible that they were, after all, human? We were not permitted to know.

By day the metal seats would absorb the full heat of the relentless southern sun, threatening to scorch exposed parts placed too suddenly and without care into their waiting embrace. Slamming the lid after one had finished forced a blast of foul and fetid air from below to waft around other exposed dangly bits suspended above the drop. Life, as we knew it, was undergoing significant changes.

The instructors' empire was atop a small rise which surveyed the cadets' mess and accommodation below. Between the mess and the ablutions, a piece of cleared, bare ground served as a parade ground on which we would be introduced to the mysteries of close order drill, and the daily administrative rituals performed.

Beyond the ablutions flowed the Murrumbidgee River, a famous Australian landmark into whose embracingly cool waters we would be occasionally permitted to throw ourselves at the end of the day's training and before our evening meal.

On our excursions to the river, we salved our competitive urges by having competitions to see who could skip or throw furthest the stones which lay in profusion along the banks. Young Ray Green impressed us all with his ability to throw a stone clear across the river. Many tried, but few could match his davidian feat.

Mr Foster's principal assistants comprised a group of Infantry Corporals not long home from service with 5RAR in South Vietnam; Corporals Cheeseman, Mason, Bradd and Poirrier. I know now that these delinquents were suffering prematurely from the effects of Agent Orange and they were keen to carry out their master's commands with an uncommon ferocity.

Once we had been issued our bedding, the corporals bullied and badgered us until we had our bed spaces roughly in the order that was expected of us. I like to think that the orderliness improved as the four weeks of our Point Hut training progressed.

At Point Hut we were to learn the rudiments of military dress and bearing, drill and weapons training, plus undergo a regime of physical fitness training. The Physical Training Instructors (PTIs) were led by Warrant Officer Class 1 Basil Thomas Webster Waters, a Korean War veteran and the last of the Army PTIs who still wore an Infantry Corps badge. All the others by this stage were members of the Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery.

The College's Drill Sergeants were there to teach us the rudiments of close order drill, the aim of which, we were led to believe, was to instil in the individual soldier a sense of instinctive obedience, which was required of him at all times. While Sergeant 'Chips' Hodder was the veteran, Sergeant Gerry Berson was just home from Vietnam and about to be married. He probably had other things on his mind and more enjoyable duties to perform, and we had rudely intruded. His displeasure with us was obvious. Staff Sergeant Roger Ballance had arrived on exchange from New Zealand. Sergeant John King completed the team.

It seemed that Sergeant Hodder ingested soap before each of his lessons, and the resultant foam and spittle which gathered at the corners of his mouth as he ranted and screamed gave him the look of a mad dog. He was not a man to be trifled with.

Sergeant Berson on the other hand affected shrill words of command more in the manner of British NCOs, and was quickly nicknamed "Chicken Man" after a popular radio segment of the day. Like his radio namesake, Sergeant Berson was everywhere, everywhere!

Sergeant Berson was also new to the game and may even been a little overawed by us all. As we struggled with the rudiments of drill and he struggled with the rudiments of instructing cadets, both sides suffered from the tension. So far did we push Sergeant Berson on one occasion that, pleading a headache, he ended the lesson and took to his bed to recover.

We were also quickly discovering that there were many things that Fourth Class cadets were not allowed to do, smoking being but one of them. One reason for this may have been that there was an extreme fire danger, and on at least one occasion we were brigaded and issued with fire fighting implements to fight a fire that was threatening the Point Hut environs. However we were also discovering that where there is a will there is a way, and the confines of the pit latrines, such as they were, provided a perfect venue for those in the class already addicted to the dreaded weed.

At night particularly, after dinner and any evening lectures, when the quiet of the camp was punctuated only by the cry of the curlew and the occasional "twank" of a closing thunderbox lid, clouds of acrid smoke would arise from behind the hessian screens which were intended to shield the occupants from the prying eyes of casual observers, but which also provided an imperfect cover for the illicit consumption of tobacco.

Occasionally one of the sharper eyed instructors would call out, "Who's smoking down there?" and the unsmoked portions of several cigarettes would rapidly disappear into the festering mass below, further diminishing the precious and at that point irreplaceable supply of cigarettes smuggled into the camp.

Later we would be encouraged to smoke during "smoko" breaks during field training, and many military, though never academic lectures commenced with the invitation, "Remove your headdress, sit easy, smoke if you wish."

One cadet, eschewing the use of nicotine, decided to use one smoko break to read a book. Offended at his initiative if not his impertinence, his instructor informed him that "smoko" breaks were for smoking and not reading and if he wasn't going to smoke then he could put the bloody book away!

Our days generally followed a predictable course. The sun arose at a relatively indecent hour, and so did we. Our first appointment was with Mr Waters and the other PT chasps, who would take us for a run. This, we were assured, was good for us.

Amongst the many items issued to us was a jock strap, a sort of male equivalent of a brassiere, a contraption of elastic straps and a strategically placed pouch which was supposed to prevent wearers from developing hernias during the strenuous routines which we were required to perform. The more basic and less pretentious of our instructors preferred to tell us that they were there to protect our 'family jewels' or 'wedding tackle.'

Collectively donning our jock straps, PT shorts and Dunlop Volleys, we would form up in three ranks on the parade ground in preparation for the torture to follow. Following the dirt road out across the cattle grid, we would then be subjected to fifty minutes of running, callisthenics and whatever other tortures the befuddled minds of the PTIs could devise at that hour of the morning. Sometimes, in preparation for later Battle PT, we would wear our leather soled Boots AB. This was as comfortable as running with a brick tied to each foot, and about as beneficial.

Upon our return, it was time for morning ablutions. In the absence of a locker or other luxuries, our sweaty and unwashed PT gear was placed within the security of our kit bags, where it was allowed to fester unwashed, contaminating the other items languishing there. Our jock straps carelessly discarded, wearing naught but towel and thongs and carrying our issue green toilet bags filled with the necessary paraphernalia, we headed off through the dust, gum nuts and sheep droppings to the primitive ablution block for a shower and more importantly a shave before we could breakfast in preparation for the day proper.

Shaving daily was an unfamiliar discipline for many of the class and some found difficulty adapting to this new and compulsory routine. To ensure that we did shave, the Army had thoughtfully issued each of us with a Gillette 'safety razor' in its own tin case, and on each following payday, a cake of soap and two razor blades. In

inexperienced hands, these issue safety razors were as safe as a hand grenade with its pin extracted.

Inspecting the reflected image of insignificant bum fluff in Army issue hand held mirrors, some decided that in an otherwise fully committed day, time spent shaving that which clearly did not need to be shaved could be better spent in more worthwhile pursuits. Wiser counsel should have prevailed.

Our ablutions complete, we then had to wade back through the mountains of sheep poo to our tents to dress ourselves for breakfast. The fire buckets placed strategically about the lines were perfect for removing from our feet the film of dust and sheep effluent acquired on the return journey, although it was advisable not to be seen using them for this purpose.

Breakfast was at 0700. We were encouraged to eat a hearty breakfast to sustain ourselves for the exertions which followed. Time between breakfast and the morning parade at 0800 was for tidying up our marquees, cleaning our weapons, and the myriad other tasks required to keep ourselves, our personal spaces and our equipment in order. It was up to individuals to determine the optimum allocation of time. The sorcerers apprentices, let out of their cages, began their daily harassment.

0800 belonged to Mr Foster. The commands which followed in quick succession were 'Let's have you! Right marker! On parade! Right dress! Number!'

Despite the fact that we were miles from nowhere and there was no bus service, Mr Foster apparently harboured an unwarranted suspicion that some of us might have decamped during the night, and he insisted each morning on numbering us, and to confirm the figures, he would call the roll.

"Answer your names!

'Dupont'

'Sir!'

'Eastwood!'

'Eastgate, Sir.'

'Thank you, Eastlake, just answer!'

'Sir'

'Elston'

'Sah!'

'Don't sah me boy, y'sound like a Swanee River coon!'

'Sir!'

We were constantly subjected to Fosterisms both printable and unprintable. Foster not only misused the English language, he also abused it. Murdered would be a better word. He had a quaint turn of phrase and was prone to exaggeration.

'You gonna clean them welts or ya gonna plant them?'

'Stop waving that arm about boy, or I'll break it off and beat ya round the head with the sticky end!'

'Look to the front, Staff Cadet Hunter! I can see the Murrumbidgee through y'ears!'

'Stop squawking boy! What are ya! Some sorta galah?'

'All round the pig's arse is pork!' Indeed!

Mr Foster then exercised his right, alone or in the company of Sir Pfred, to inspect us, our dress, our bearing, and the state of our chins. The inevitable eventually happened.

'Staff Cadet Dupont, you shaved this morning?'

'No Sir!'

"Whaaat! Why not?'

'Don't need to Sir!'

This answer produced from Mr Foster a spectacular paroxysm of rage. Dupont was despatched to his bed space to return with his safety razor, and he was directed to stand in front of the Class and immediately remove the offending fluff from his face.

Who amongst us did not feel sympathy for the pathetic figure as it endured the public indignity of a dry shave, discovering simultaneously that the Army now required that its tender visage, unaccustomed as it was to the regular touch of a razor, would henceforth be required to be shaved every day, whether it needed it or not.

Without the benefit of creams or water, Dupont's Gillette safety razor painfully scraped his pink skin removing his immature whiskers strip by strip, leaving small rivulets of blood in its passage. He may have been the first, he was not the only one, but he was the one we all remember.

No wonder he grew a beard as soon as he left the Army.

Once Mr Foster had finished with us, we were relegated to the other instructors. Drill and weapon training predominated. This latter task fell to the four stooges from 5RAR who instantly transferred the antipathy they had built up to the Viet Cong to us.

The summer of 1968 was one of the hottest on record, and the dessicatingly dry heat soon took its toll on bodies which were already being stretched to the limit. The milk churns of salted cordial and blocks of ice which were regularly brought to where we were training were quickly consumed. As fast as we would drink the proffered liquid, we would sweat it out. This was nectar to the flies.

The College doctor was a regular visitor, to attend to our minor ailments, to monitor the hygiene standards in the camp and occasionally to lecture us not just on first aid, but on preventative measures.

One of these lectures concentrated on the dangers of consorting with loose women and the effects of venereal disease. As we had not seen any women since our arrival at the College, there was a heightened level of interest in this lecture. We were shown a graphic film of the consequences of incautious liaisons, although by that stage there were those who would have happily taken the chance.

The highlight of the Doctor's lecture came when he handed out condoms, throwing them amongst us like lollies at a picnic. Was his largesse motivated by a concern for our welfare, or was he aware of impending entertainments about which we had not yet been told? We could but hope, and now thanks to Doctor Gosling, we were prepared!

The night provided some relief from the relentless summer heat and even the flies seemed to go elsewhere to rest. It also provided an opportunity for other diversions

for the instructors, who were allowed the luxury of a few beers within the confines of their mess. They developed a cruel form of sport.

I have since seen a film in which British soldiers returning from a long jungle patrol had to cross a clearing before reaching the safety of their lines. Japanese snipers covered the clearing with fire, and would shoot the soldiers just as it seemed that they were finally safe. Mr Foster and his cronies developed a Point Hut 1968 version.

We were required to slow march from the mess tent to our lines, reverting to a normal march only after we had reached the road verge closest to our tent. Mr Foster and the other instructors would verbally snipe at us as we marched and, waiting until we were just about to step from the gravel, send us back to the Mess again for some infraction or other of the rules of slow marching.

Occasionally he would delegate the task to one of the delinquents, and he and Sir Pfred would sit back and enjoy the sport.

One evening, perhaps after too much beer had been consumed by at least one of these young corporals, he stumbled across our lines. These days it would be called 'flashbacks' and he would receive a pension for the condition from the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Then he was just pissed, but the sight of the tent pegs all in a row proved too much for him. Standing unsteadily to attention, he began to dress the assembled pegs in the approved manner.

'Number two, back! Steady! Number four, forward! Steady! Number six, steady!'

And so on and so on until he was apprehended by two of his colleagues and taken away for the rest that he so obviously deserved.

When the delinquents from 5RAR weren't actually harrassing us, they were left to their own resources. I have since discovered that these hyperactive juveniles were once sent to the Majura rifle ranges to prepare everything in advance of a session of live firing. The 25 meter range at Point Hut was sufficient for some familiarisation firing and smaller weapons, but we needed to travel to the College's main ranges for SLR application practices and to fire the GPMG M60.

They discovered a sheep which had shuffled off its mortal coil and which was in an advanced state of decomposition. It had become host to an advanced fly breeding programme and was alive with a seething mass of maggots, the sight of which, let alone the smell, would have unsettled more sensitive stomachs. But not theirs.

They found some wire netting in which they encased the carcass of this malodorous beast, throwing the whole into a nearby dam. When they were discovered, they were pulling succulent yabbies off their bait, and had filled two large, empty ration pack tins with the catch.

Like a small terrier with a bone, they refused to part with their prize or to share it with the other more senior instructors, relenting only when threatened with dire consequences, such as being thrown into jail. Had we realised it at the time, it provided a valuable lesson.

Old age and cunning will always triumph over youth and inexperience.

