

THE PARABLE OF THE BEES

In wich Eastgate recalls an early encounter with First Class

THIS is not truly my story.

It belongs to Padre Les Thomson, who used it as a filler in numerous sermons when late nights, over indulgence or lack of inspiration threatened the fabric of the day's congregational inspiration.

It does however involve me, Corporal Green, some bees and the padre himself. It all began quite innocently, or at least as innocently as any story of Fourth Class training can begin.

I had survived another ordeal which passed as an evening meal during the first few weeks after our arrival back at Duntroon from Point Hutt. I was making my way back to the barracks block where I lived.

During a Canberra summer it does not get dark until quite late and the summer of 1968 had been particularly severe. So it was still quite light and hot as I made my way back to the block.

There were a couple of senior class cadets in front of me

Hindsight suggests that they may have recently returned from a session at the Quarter Bar , a sort of First Class RMC equivalent of a Chinese opium den, where the ingestion of strong waters altered the personalities of its clients.

They were standing by a water tap where something had caught their attention.

There was no way to avoid them. One of the First Class cadets called me over.

"What do you see, Fourth Class?" he aske, a First Class whom I recognised as Corporal Paul Green.

"A tap, Corporal Green," I replied as protocol demanded.

"What else, Fourth Class?"

There were several other things in my immediate line of vision. A concrete path, bricks.

I thought that I knew what they were after.

"A dead bee, Corporal Green!"

"Bees, Fourth Class, bees. And they are all dead. And why did they die?"

I was quickly discovering that individual senior class cadets pursued an amazing range of interests. Fourth Class would be harangued in the Mess and in the barrack blocks on a range of topics which fascinated individual members of Second and First Class. Fourth Class training demanded that we should share these myriad interests with their adherents, and by the end of the year each of us could wax lyrical on an amazing variety of topics. Obviously Corporal Green's interest was in bees.

"I don't know why they died, Corporal Green," I replied, sure that I would soon be on my way to becoming an expert in the life cycle of bees.

"They died of thirst, Fourth Class! Whose fault is it that the bees died of thirst?"

"It's Fourth Class' fault that they died of thirst, Corporal Green," I replied, for in some matters I was gaining some knowledge. The universal guilt of Fourth Class was a constant theme in Fourth Class training.

"Well what are we going to do about it Fourth Class?"

"I shall water the bees, Corporal Green!" I replied in a moment of inspiration, for necessity is the mother of invention.

"Make sure you do Fourth Class, for if I find any more dead bees I shall hold you personally responsible. Now water the bees, do ten (push ups) and bog away!"

I did as I was commanded. I turned on the tap.

"What are you doing Fourth Class?"

Since he had directed me to perform the task, I thought that it would be perfectly obvious to Corporal Green what I was doing.

"I am watering the bees, Corporal Green."

"Don't you realise we are in the middle of a drought? How much water do you think bees drink?"

"I think that bees don't drink very much at all, Corporal Green."

"Well don't waste water. I don't want you to drown the bees!"

"Yes, Corporal Green."

I turned the tap on such that a small amount of water dripped out. This apparently satisfied Corporal Green that it was sufficient to slake the bees' thirst without exposing them to the risk of death by drowning. I did the ten push ups and bogged away as I had been commanded.

From then on, each time that I passed the tap I stopped to ensure that there was a steady drip of water. It seemed Corporal Green was right for whatever had caused the death of the original bees, there was now a constant stream of bees at the tap apparently availing themselves of the service provided so generously by myself at the behest of Corporal Green.

I often had to explain my behaviour to other senior class cadets but they generally left me alone after I had explained the reason for my apparently strange behaviour. The end result was that Corporal Green, the bees and myself were all happy.

As I performed this chore on one occasion I was unaware that someone else was approaching until a figure behind me enquired as to what I was doing.

I turned to discover the Anglican Padre, Chaplain Les Thompson standing behind me.

"What are you doing Eastgate?"

"I am watering the bees, Sir!"

"Why are you watering the bees?"

"Because Corporal Green told me to," I replied, and went on to explain the whole story to him.

Chaplain Thompson had arrived at the College at about the same time as the 1968 entry. He had recently returned from service with 6RAR in South Vietnam and was at the personnel depot when the Queensland cadets were being processed in Brisbane. I

presumed he was probably having as much trouble coming to grips with the College as we were.

I explained to the padre that watering the bees kept Corporal Green happy, it certainly seemed to be appreciated by the bees but most importantly, it kept me out of trouble with Corporal Green.

Fourth Class had enough worries without the added problem of being held responsible for the death by dehydration of the College's bees. It was less onerous than some of the other things that we were required to do in the name of Fourth Class training, and it even provided me with an excuse to escape occasionally to perform my directed duty.

I told him that I had been warned what to expect during Forth Class Training by a couple of previous graduates, and that my attitude to bastardisation was that everyone else had been through it before, and it would eventually be over. Rather than fight against it, I would adapt to it, accept what was offered and not attempt to rock the boat. I reasoned that it would be a lot easier to survive it that way.

He told me later that when my performance was being discussed before a board of studies, some concern was expressed that I was taking it all too seriously, that I was a "military moron." I might add that this opinion of me was offered by men who otherwise polished the backs of their toothbrushes and subjected their children to a regime of 30 minutes close order drill before bed. But I digress.

The Padre recounted the story of the bees, suggesting that I had in fact struck a pretty good balance between the nonsense of bastardisation and the college routine. Where some cadets were having problems coming to grips with the relentless harassment of bastardisation, he felt that I was taking it all in my stride.

Not only did he use the story in later years in sermons to make some point or other, I also understand that when counselling other cadets in later years who were buckling under the pressure of bastardisation, he would recount the story of Eastgate and the bees, suggesting that the best way to handle the situation was not to fight or rebel against it, but to accept it in good humour and learn to adapt and live with it. It would not last forever.

I have to admit that even in my final year as a cadet, every time I passed by the tap I would surreptitiously turn it on slightly to allow it to drip to provide sustenance for the bees.

It was certainly not a task to be entrusted to some foolish and irresponsible Fourth Class.

Fortunately by that time I did not have to explain my actions to anyone.

Postscript

I might add when my son was a a cadet living in A61 in 1999 the tap had been removed. And there were no bees.

I rest my case.