

A NICE EDUCATION

In which Eastgate recalls several one on one tutoring by Second Class...and others

“Time on our hands, always in the shit, never let the bastards get you down.”

Fourth Class motto.

We quickly discovered that there were many things that we would be required to absorb and learn before we could be commissioned as Army officers.

First and foremost we had to learn the names of all the senior cadets. What passed as social intercourse with the other cadets in the first few frenetic weeks after we returned from Point Hut consisted of being screamed at by Second Class whenever we hove into view. Most took the time to introduce themselves to us.

“Who am I Fourth Class?”

“I don’t know!”

“You don’t know WHO!!”

“I don’t know who you are!”

“You don’t know who I am WHO!!”

The situation was often complicated by the fact that you were standing rigidly to attention looking straight ahead while the individual concerned with making your acquaintance was standing behind you shouting in your ear. It helped if he was standing directly in front of you wearing his uniform, which had a name tag over the right breast pocket. If we weren’t able to ascertain the name of the cadet who was introducing himself by reading his name tag, fortune occasionally intervened in the form of a Third Class cadet who was permitted to share with you the knowledge that this was in fact Staff Cadet Mengele of Second Class.

“Well Fourth Class, who am I?”

“Mr Mengele!!”

“Mr Mengele WHO!!”

“Mr Mengele, Mr Mengele!”

“At last Fourth Class, now do ten and bog away.”

Not only could we now add the name of Mr Mengele of Second Class to the list of those with whom we were on more than just nodding acquaintance, we were able to demonstrate our increasing knowledge of the cadet argot by doing ten push-ups before leaving wherever it was that we were when we had become acquainted with Mr Mengele in the first instance.

Some twisted soul added a nasty refinement to the introduction process by having a name tag made with the name ARGUS-TUFT inscribed upon it. Following the accepted practice of reading Mr Argus-Tuft’s name from his name tag and repeating it

to him when asked invited the accusation that you were giving this gentleman some gratuitous advice about what he could do with what by putting it where.

Another read MISTER, inviting the response “Mister Mister, Mister Mister!”

Such practices amused the perpetrators if no one else. While the senior cadets allowed themselves the indulgence of a good belly laugh at our expense, they were totally unforgiving of any Fourth Class who reciprocated, or who at least allowed his amusement to show. Occasionally, however, the behaviour of the senior cadets was so ridiculous that even the most miserably put upon Fourth Class cadet was unable to constrain himself from grinning.

“What are you pissing at, Fourth Class!”

Of all the tribulations faced by Fourth Class, the accusation that one might have suddenly become incontinent, no matter how temporarily was a major humiliation. Self control was an absolute requirement of Fourth Class behaviour if not a major component of individual survival.

“I beg your pardon, Mister Mister?”

“I said what are you pissing at, Fourth Class?”

“I wasn’t aware that I was pissing, Mister Mister.”

“Well you are, Fourth Class. Wipe the piss!”

“I beg your pardon, Mister Mister?”

“You heard me. Wipe the piss!”

“I don’t think...”

“The piss, Fourth Class! Wipe the piss!”

When the penny finally dropped, one learned that pissing in cadet speak was actually grinning, and that the senior cadet was directing one to remove the grin from one’s face. The method of doing so was to pass the palm of one’s open hand across one’s face in the manner of a magician’s flourish, leaving a stern, unsmiling visage in place of the grin.

Sometimes the effect of this action was to increase one’s mirth, since Second Class were, after all, masters in the art of extracting emotions from Fourth Class that they would much rather have kept under control. The result was usually much pissing, wiping, pissing, wiping, more pissing and inevitably multiple push-ups.

One cadet, one of multiple siblings who attempted all or part of Duntroon’s rigours in various combinations of training packages, was prone to pissing. He was the only one of the brothers who completed the course in its entirety, and was therefore more knowledgeable than most about what to expect from Fourth Class training. He recalls that he was such a “seasoned Bastardisee” that he was, in company with the author, categorised as a “pissing idiot.”

Poor demented soul, he lost count of the number of times that he was told to “Wipe the piss, Gibbons!” particularly by the Bobbsy twins (Jones et Carr.) It was an admonition he probably heard as often as “Take an extra, Buchanan!”

Introductions were also assisted by sending Fourth Class on some often spurious errand into one of the other accommodation blocks, when a whole new group of individuals would take the time to introduce themselves to you and assess your ability

to perform push-ups. A mission which should have taken no longer than a few minutes could stretch into an hour or more and earn you further ire upon your return if you had failed to achieve what it was that you were actually sent to perform or collect.

Trousers, we discovered, were called truff, and the webbed equipment which we wore in the field, on the rifle range but more often on defaulters' parade was known as poop. Cadets put in or fluffed in lieu of breaking wind, while cleaning and polishing was in fact bogging. One mashed rather than studied. Cadets who were well turned out as a result of their attention to their uniforms were bogged-on, while those well prepared for their examinations were mashed-on.

Some managed to be both. Indeed those who paid meticulous attention to the state of their dress and bearing as well as devoting themselves to their academic and military studies were derisively said to be both boggers and mashers. Others preferred to play billiards instead.

Our hectic training schedule often meant that we might have three or four uniform changes in a day, often in swift succession. Indeed, academic lectures, PT and drill all required a different order of dress so that sometimes such changes might occur in the space of three consecutive periods. This rapid change of uniforms was known as leaps, and Second Class were thoughtful enough to allow us to practice the technique under their tutelage during our evening shower time.

Sometimes to add a little incentive not to say a little competition into this practice, they would sometimes detain us in the showers until two minutes before the evening mess parade to test our skill. This was known as "wet twos." Nothing was overlooked in ensuring that we would rapidly adapt to College life.

Items of rubbish were placed in bish tins, which came in two sizes, a waste paper basket size for one's room and garbage size for each corridor for the collective rubbish. Bish tins were also useful for filling with water for throwing over other cadets, particularly if they were in bed or underneath a window in the middle of winter.

Toc described any snack, but particularly was used to describe morning or afternoon tea. We understood it was an acronym for tea or coffee, though tac described the otherwise indescribable hot liquid which was the end result of countless indiscriminate uses of the Army's large multi-pot urns in which either tea or coffee were made. Coated black on the inside, they added their own peculiar flavour to the resulting brew whenever another batch was made by the stewards, who were known as seals.

Morning tea was provided to coincide with a twenty minute break from lectures commencing at 1000 hours. While First and Second Class had their own coffee rooms wherein to partake of their toc free from the unwarranted attentions of others, Fourth Class had to compete with Third Class from the bountifully laden tables in a room in the back corner of the Cadets' Mess. The contest to secure the most appetising pieces of sinker, scones and occasionally pikelets was known as a toc race.

It was always a source of annoyance to the engineers that their rigorous academic discipline placed them at something of a disadvantage when it came to morning toc races. The artist's more leisurely lifestyle allowed them to be in the mess on most mornings well before the engineers and thus consume the pick of the delights on offer.

This was apparently of some annoyance to the otherwise placid engineers, particularly Joff Johnson, whose demeanour between rising and sometime mid morning when he finally reached full consciousness was akin to that of a wounded and cornered grizzly bear. He would storm into the toc room, survey the mere crumbs which were the remnants of a sumptuous repast before savaging any who were unfortunate enough to intrude upon his personal space.

The engineers had their revenge. They prevailed upon their lecturer to release them early from their class, so that they arrived at morning toc before the rest of us, whereupon they proceeded to devour what they could before biting small pieces off all those items they could not.

We also had platoon tocs, generally on a Friday night when Fourth Class were allowed to make toast or other delicacies for the senior classes. Once we were allowed out for Friday afternoon shopping, the range of fare on Friday tocs improved considerably. Once a month, we were allowed Friday night shopping, when we were able to wear other than Rec Dress, and to remain in town until 2100. However, until we were trusted to dress ourselves properly, we would be lined up to have our ties, tweeds and welts inspected before being allowed to board the College bus which transported us to and from Civic.

As the intensity of Fourth Class training gradually decreased these Friday night sessions became more relaxed and friendly, although the brutality of our initial encounters with some members of First and second Class made us ever cautious in our dealings with them.

Army cooks made a version of slab cake which was known as sinker. It takes little imagination to work out why. But there were occasions when we would be grateful for even the dubious benefit of a piece of sinker and a cup of tac for toc.

Nor were our intellectual needs neglected. Before we could proceed on leave and disport ourselves before the good citizens of Canberra (or more importantly from our perspective, their daughters) we were required to pass a hurdle known as The Screed Test. In any event, we weren't allowed leave for the first sixteen weeks, and the whole thing was contrived to ensure that we remained confined in the college as long as it could be arranged.

Even if a Fourth Class cadet had got every question right in The Screed Test on his first attempt (an unheard of event) the Second Class committee which supervised the examination and marking process would devise a way to deduct marks for untidiness or any other reason they could think of.

The Screed was a document which contained information which was a mix of College and Army history and contemporary information. Some of it was useful, much trivia but it is indelibly imprinted on the mind of every cadet who survived Fourth Class.

Other important information we learned orally or by investigation. How briskly refreshing it was to trot to the top of Mount Pleasant on a balmy Canberra autumn evening to learn by rote the inscription on the tank, after having previously gone there to learn its cubic capacity in gallons. Fancy Second Class not knowing that it was not a water tank!

Or the inscription on General Bridges' grave and the number of links in the chain which surrounded it. How disappointed Second Class would be upon your return to

discover that some thoughtless soul had recently replaced the chain link fence which had been there since 3 Sep 15 with one of tubular steel!

Even the height of the College flagpole was the subject of much learned discussion. It was generally agreed to be 146 feet, four and one half inches allowing for bird droppings and pressure variations in the earth's crust.

How we marvelled at the seven ancient and modern wonders of Duntroon! The Steps That Lead To Nowhere, General Bridge's Grave, General Grave's Bridge, Cork Block Cavern, (The Room Within A Room,) HMAS Alamein, The Maze (which had been temporarily removed) The Bell That Never Tolls, The Tank That Holds No Water, The Backwards Boomerangs, Tom's Half Acre.

We also felt that Second Class might have learned to practice a little restraint after the cautionary tale of Staff Cadet Casey, who was locked in a broom cupboard during some skylarking before the Corps went on leave, and whose skeletal remains were not discovered until the cadets returned some weeks later. His trusty steed *Invader*, no doubt grief stricken at the loss of his favourite cadet, also pined away, but the two had been skeletally reunited and were honoured guests at the moment of graduation of every successful cadet.

We learned the mysteries of *Enobesra*, the relic of a mule which had wandered the College grounds until it had died and whose pelvic bone was surmounted upon a stick and waved about at major sporting events for its purported ability to bring good fortune to the College's teams. When during our time the informal "screed" was put into a more formal booklet, it bore the title "*Enobesra*" after this important totem.

As a concession to the Kiwi cadets, the College had its own *haka*, a fearsome and intimidatory ritual performed by the once cannibalistic native residents of the Land of the Long White Cloud – Aotearora - as a prelude to battle. Since the Maoris have long since been dissuaded from eating their enemies if not from fighting them, the main purpose of the *haka* is now to attempt to unsettle one's opponents before a major sporting event. The College had adopted this practice.

The *haka* was a combination of words, movements and gestures which each new Fourth Class was required to learn. Instruction was the province of the senior New Zealand cadets and we would be required to congregate in the Gymnasium to learn the ritual, and to rehearse it before major occasions.

Arraigned in rows, we would crouch with hands on thighs while the leader intoned:

Hope!

Ringa Pakra, Ringa Pakra, Wae Wae Takahara!

To which we were required to respond:

Kamate Kamate RMC RMC

Kamate Kamate RMC RMC

His he his he his he ha

His he his he his he ha

HE HA

RMC RMC

HA!

All this was accompanied by much finely choreographed foot stamping plus fierce gesticulation, tongue poking and grimaces, things which come naturally to your average Maori but which require a great deal of concentration on the part of we mere Pakeha.

When performed by near naked, heavily tattooed natives wearing little else but grass skirts, tapa loin cloths and carrying war clubs, it can be quite a spectacle. When performed by callow youths dressed in identical grey slacks, white shirts, college ties and regimental blazers, and waving a piece of bone on a stick, it was faintly ridiculous. Even had we been so bold at the time to hold such a view, we would never have dared to express such. We simply threw ourselves into the *haka* with our customary Fourth Class gusto.

It was not the only Maori custom we adopted.

In honour of the legendary industriousness of that race, and in an age before political correctness expunged much of the colour if not the prejudice from our lives and from our language, resting in the privacy of one's room was referred to as Maori PT.

We were equally politically incorrect when it came to the matter of religious observance.

Attendance at Church by the cadets was compulsory, so it was important to have a clearly defined denomination. As with many other things, the College neatly separated the world's major religions into two distinct categories: Christians and Choppers, short for Rock Choppers (RC.) Assorted lesser religions, such as Buddhists, were free to choose and change religious affiliation on the basis of the immediate benefits available.

The College closed over the other more universally recognised religious festivals, so the major occasion observed by the cadets was St Patrick's Day, when robust battle was joined between the Choppers on the one hand, and the Christians on the other.

Water, an important symbol in many religious rituals, was a crucial element in this observance, particularly if it was being dispensed in volume from fire hoses or bish tins. Green and orange smoke grenades marked the rallying points of the faithful.

Martyrs from both sides sacrificed themselves for their beliefs, while conversions of the unbelievers were performed, often under duress.

Occasionally there might even be a re-enactment of some great event from the Bible, such as Sampson's bringing down of the pillars, or Christ's overturning of the money lenders' tables in the temple, when cadets from one sectarian affiliation might rearrange the room of a cadet from the opposition faction to resemble the biblical scene.

Miracles were not unknown, and there were plenty of senior cadets willing to bless Fourth Class with a few extra drills to help them celebrate this momentous occasion.

Such an assiduous pursuit of knowledge was not without its cost. Second Class gave so unstintingly of their time to ensure that our every waking moment was so full of purpose that we often had to spend time after lights out secreted beneath our sheets completing by the dim light of a torch such trivial and seemingly unimportant tasks as ironing our uniforms and spit polishing our boots for the following morning's parade.

After all, there were plenty of opportunities in the lashings of spare time available to Fourth Class in the normal course of every day to retire to one's bed for a few moments contemplation and a spot of Maori PT.