

THE TENNIS PARTY

“This function is organised for the benefit of Fourth Class, and is held in the First Term, normally on a Sunday. It is the first opportunity the new cadets have of meeting the young ladies of Canberra. The function extends over the whole day, with cadets and their partners participating in various activities including tennis, bowling and swimming. At night dinner is provided, followed by a dance at which music is provided by the College band. It is a most enjoyable day, and provides a welcome relief after the tensions of adapting to a new life at the College.”

‘Enobesra.’ Cadets Handbook. 1971.

On the day of our return to the College from Point Hut, those cadets not immediately engaged in a summer sport enthusiastically threw themselves into the sport of baiting Fourth Class. These beasts would be joined later in the day by the absent ones once the games were complete.

After the evening meal, those senior cadets who had tired of Fourth Class training could disappear to the College picture theatre Over The Hill where, for the princely sum of ten cents, they could enjoy two films. Those with interests outside the College disappeared to enjoy the delights of the Nation’s capital, most probably in the arms of some of its fair maidens, while we were left to the devices of the less socially inclined cadets who preferred to seek their solitary pleasures behind the locked doors of their rooms.

At some stage in the evening, well after the sun had set, yet another figure appeared in the doorway to my room. This new arrival was dressed in cricket creams which bore the obvious mark of ball and grass, sure signs that it had recently been belting cork with willow. Its eyes were also bloodshot, it was unsteady on its feet, its speech was slurred and its breath smelled of alcohol.

Many years later, when I was being a policeman in PNG, I would have formed the opinion that it was intoxicated, but not then, for we had been told that cadets were forbidden to consume alcohol. It also seemed to have forgotten who it was, although it seemed to know who I was.

“Eastgate! Who am I?”

I took a calculated punt, for there was only one person in my immediate circle of new acquaintances to whom I had not yet been introduced, my section commander, Corporal JMM Sheedy.

“Corporal Sheedy, Corporal Sheedy?”

This seemed to satisfy him, and he wobbled off in the direction of Mick Roseblade’s room for confirmation that my assessment was indeed correct.

“Roseblade! Who am I?”

Mick Roseblade, who had also cottoned onto the value of rat cunning as a vital tool in Fourth Class survival also correctly identified the figure as Corporal Sheedy, Corporal Sheedy.

We were then invited to stand to attention in the door of his room while Corporal Sheedy disrobed prior to performing his ablutions. We may even have been directed to pour the wretch a bath, as later became his custom, as he enjoyed nothing better after a long and tiring day of cricket than a good, long soak in a hot tub...On this occasion, tired and emotional, he had some difficulty removing his several items of flannelled apparel while simultaneously attempting to prevent the wall of his room from collapsing on top of him.

“Got a girlfriend Eastgate? Roseblade?”

While Roseblade was happy to admit that at that stage that he did not have a girlfriend, the question in my case probed rather difficult and painful circumstances into which I preferred not to delve. With some hesitation, I likewise replied in the negative.

Having completely disrobed, the now naked Corporal Sheedy proceeded to give us both a stern lecture on the pitfalls involved in associating with members of the opposite sex.

We discovered that Corporal Sheedy was smitten with a young lady whose affections were also being eagerly pursued by another. This other, it transpired, was a helicopter pilot who was at that very moment in Vietnam, elevating his status over that of the cadet still some months away from graduation and even further from the field of battle.

Like many of the eligible young ladies pursued by the Duntroon cadet fraternity, she came from a service background. She was unable to decide between her two suitors, being torn between the aviator who was away fighting for freedom and the lovelorn Sheedy waiting patiently but expectantly for her troth.

Sheedy’s own father was a soldier, a gunner and World War 2 veteran who was the head at the time head of Army recruiting in Sydney. All the NSW cadets had passed through his hands. Sheedy’s ambition was to follow his father into the Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery. He was well on his way to achieving this goal, his frustrated love life the only black cloud on an otherwise bright horizon.

“Women,” Corporal Sheedy informed us, “Wunnerful creatures! Can’t do without ‘em.”

“Why would they wanna marry helicopter pilots when they could marry a gunner,” he asked rhetorically, for such a proposition seemed perfectly logical to both Roseblade and myself.

The conversation proceeded in a similar vein for an exceedingly long time while Roseblade and I stood rigidly to attention and Sheedy concentrated the remainder of his attention on simply remaining upright.

Sheedy’s romantic predicament did not strike a particularly sympathetic chord with either of us. Our lives for the preceding month had been totally devoid of any female contact and I had to deal with my own remorse at the careless way I had discarded the affections of a young lady who deserved far better treatment than she received.

In a life full of slings and arrows and screaming Second Class, how we would have appreciated a tender feminine touch and a whispered endearment. If Corporal Sheedy’s sole problem in life was that the delightful young lady whose company he

regularly enjoyed was unsure as to whether the arrangement should become permanent, then he should worry!

What Roseblade and I did not know at the time was that our classmate Johnson, whose cricketing prowess had earned him an immediate spot in the College's First XI, had also been allowed to indulge in a few post match ales and had retired to his bed tired and emotional without experiencing the vicissitudes of Second Class interference while setting up his room. His turn would come on the morrow.

There was however, some good news which I would later discover. Corporal Sheedy's lady had a younger sister whom the suitor Sheedy wished to impress as a way of inveigling himself into the heart of the object of his own desire. She would be invited to attend the Queen's Birthday Ball and I would be her Prince Charming.

Every cloud, they say, even in the greyest days of Fourth Class training, has a silver lining. But June was a long, long long way away, and there were other feminine entertainments planned for Fourth Class in the meantime to which we would have to lend our attentions.

One of the favourite diversions of the Roman Empire was the practice of feeding Christians to the lions. This was done in the name of sport, but was a particularly popular form of public entertainment. It was heavily weighted in favour of the lions. The Duntroon equivalent of lion feeding in 1968 was the Tennis Party, during which an equally hapless Fourth Class was fed to a voracious pack of selected Canberra ladies.

The Tennis Party was both a College and Canberra institution. It dated from the days when Canberra was a lot smaller and a lot more genteel than it was in the late nineteen sixties. Ostensibly it was an opportunity for the newly arrived Fourth Class cadets to be introduced to suitable eligible young ladies from Canberra society. Each cadet was required to invite a young lady to an afternoon of tennis and other diversions, to be followed by a buffet dinner and an evening of dancing.

In the halcyon days of the Tennis Party, the venue was the gardens of Duntroon House with its manicured lawns and carefully cultivated gardens, including the famous maze. Cadets and their partners actually played tennis, took high tea and strolled the College grounds under the discrete supervision of chaperones.

The tennis party traditionally occurred about week twelve on the College calendar and was held on a Sunday afternoon and evening. Week twelve was well within the sixteen week no leave period before Fourth Class had attempted the Screed Test, a prerequisite to being allowed out on leave.

Since the vast majority of cadets had had no contact at all with anyone in Canberra, locating a partner was difficult. The Canberra cadets were invaluable in providing the names and addresses of suitable young ladies, and this was probably the most reliable method of finding a Tennis Party partner.

The least reliable method was relying on one of the senior class cadets to provide the details of a potential partner. There was a list of names of Canberra ladies which was provided to unsuspecting Fourth Class. Most of the ladies had found their way on to this list by way of some defect of looks, personality or behaviour, or combination of all three.

Some but not all would have been shocked to know that they were on the list. And when it came to the actual party, some of the young ladies knew better than their hosts the format for the afternoon and evening's activities.

By 1968 tennis was no longer the popular social diversion that it had once been. Few people actually played tennis at the Tennis Party, although the programme had been little altered and still showed Fourth Class cadets and their partners as playing tennis between 1.00 PM when the ladies arrived and the evening meal.

In 1968, the maze had also disappeared. Cadet legend had it that it had been removed because a previous Commandant had been embarrassed to discover irrefutable evidence of illicit passion within its confines while showing it to some distinguished guests.

The real reason probably had more to do with horticultural rather than moral degeneracy. Both the maze and the hedges which bordered the College parade ground had been removed, either through disease or old age, and then replanted. Both were undergoing a period of regeneration during my time as a cadet, and have now been restored to their original glory.

I had severe reservations about ringing an unknown female and inviting her to almost twelve hours of dubious entertainments. I procrastinated as long as I was able, but we were under tremendous pressure from the senior class cadets to have our partner arranged well in advance of the event. Attendance with a partner was compulsory, even for those unfortunate cadets who were repeating fourth class and who had attended the Tennis Party the year before. They at least had the opportunity of meeting young ladies and were not necessarily in the position of being forced to take someone whom they had never met.

I was provided with a name and a telephone number by one of the senior classmen, probably by my second class whose base sense of humour was limited to whoopee cushions and leaving tacks on the pews in chapel. The other Fourth Class in my section was from Canberra, Mick Roseblade, but I do not remember that he was any help in finding a partner.

Having procrastinated as long as I was able, I was eventually faced with the inevitability of having to ring a total stranger and inviting her to an afternoon of tennis. Despite having grown up in a home which boasted a lawn tennis court and despite several attempts at tennis coaching, I still did not do tennis. I was equally recalcitrant about ball room dancing.

On the ground floor and in the foyer of the barracks block in which I lived there was a public telephone. It was the old black variety with the A and B buttons which one pressed at the command of the operator, or when the called party answered. I was in the phone booth calling the young lady whose name I had been given when my "grandfather" Bob Pothof chanced by.

He immediately recognised the name and number and depressed the telephone cradle, cancelling the call. It appeared that I had been given the name of a lady who was regular attendee at Tennis Parties and who was known to several classes of cadets as "Big Red." How he knew this I do not know, but his timely intervention was one of several favours that he voluntarily performed for me that year.

My confidence was severely shaken by this near miss with notoriety, for we had all heard of the supposedly fierce reputation of "Big Red." Partnering this Tennis Party

legend would have attracted the unwelcome attentions of the senior cadets as well as the unwelcome advances of the young lady concerned. She apparently compounded matters by insisting on playing tennis.

The build up to the Tennis Party was intense. As the actual day drew nigh, a programme of individual preparation was instigated by second class, who bore the brunt of the responsibility for "Fourth Class Training" also known as bastardisation. Legends of old Tennis Parties and Amazonian guests were dusted off.

It was not unknown for cadets ultimately to marry their Tennis Party partner. Indeed, more than any other achievement, the fact that one married the girl that one took to the Tennis Party would be cited above distinguished or gallant service as the most memorable milestone in one's career. It was not unknown, but it was rare. Most cadets had a very different experience and attendance at the Tennis Party was not always a pleasant experience for the ladies involved either.

Apart from the legendary list of names, Second Class were determined that each and every Fourth Class cadet would be in the peak of physical condition for the big event. This mainly consisted of regular supplements of Vegemite, which was known at the College as "Crotch," and was reputed to have beneficial effects on the libido.

When lightly spread on freshly buttered toast it is one of life's essential pleasures. When taken by the teaspoon or desert spoon, it is vile. In the weeks and days leading up to the Tennis Party, the sight of Fourth Class cadets consuming vast quantities of Vegemite in the Cadets' Mess was a common sight.

The other most common form of preparation consisted of performing immense numbers of push-ups. These were in any event the most common form of unofficial summary punishment for Fourth Class for all sorts of minor infringements of the myriad written and unwritten rules which so dominated their existence. However the number of push-ups awarded increased significantly as the Tennis Party approached, again for their alleged efficacy in improving one's libido.

Final preparations took place at around the lunch time meal on the actual day of the Tennis Party. Dress for the Tennis Party was "Rec" (recreation) Dress, which consisted of grey slacks, white shirt, College tie and blazer, known as a reefer jacket and black issue Army shoes. The jacket and trousers at least had been tailor made. Most Fourth Class still sported the alarmingly short haircuts that they had received at Point Hut.

Second Class closely supervised the showering and excessive shaving which they considered essential before we should meet our partners. They also applied excessive quantities of cheap after shave and other vile deodorants, all the better to impress the young Canberra maidens. What little hair we possessed was slicked down with California Poppy and Brylcreem.

Such creams and lotions were by 1968 unfashionable and most of us had eschewed their use. This mattered naught to Second class who wished us to look our best, and seemed to have forgotten that just "a little dab'll do you!" Washed, shaved, primped, perfumed, pomaded and fortified with excessive doses of Vitamin B and Niacin, we were sent forth to meet our dates.

After my near miss with "Big Red," I had been hesitant in seeking out another partner. My classmate Darryl Crunkhorn came to my aid when but a few days before the party, he noticed in the Canberra Times a photograph of two young ladies. He had

looked up one in the phone book and asked her to the Tennis Party. She accepted. When asked about her friend, she supplied details which Crunkhorn gave to me. She likewise accepted my invitation to attend.

The Army provided a bus to collect the young ladies from their homes and deliver them again afterwards. The bus was due to arrive about 1.00 PM and Fourth Class were gathered by the Bell Tower outside Duntroon House to meet their prospective partners. Introductions were made, and soon the various couples were making their way around the various attractions of the College. Some actually played tennis.

One cadet, who was repeating Fourth Class and who had to endure the torture of a second Tennis Party stood discretely in the background as the young ladies disembarked from the bus. Realisation soon dawned that the stout young lady in the tennis dress, robustly practising a variety of tennis shots, was to be his partner for the evening.

She had the confident air of someone who had been before and who was familiar with the proceedings. In act of extreme cowardice he surreptitiously retired to his room. She spent the remainder of the day determinedly trying to find him.

The young ladies organised by Crunkhorn had declined the use of Army transport, preferring to make their own way to the College. The young lady who had accepted my invitation arrived on the back of her boy friend's motorbike. She was wearing an exceedingly short mini skirt of the day, and had slung over her shoulder her evening attire, another mini skirt of similar length. Mercifully she was not carrying a tennis racquet. Having put her belongings in the rooms put aside for the purpose, we set about attempting to amuse ourselves in the intervening period between her arrival and the evening's activities.

I have little recollection of what we did. My partner was incredibly short on conversation, most of which consisted of monosyllabic responses to my strained attempts at polite conversation. I seemed to remember that we actually watched a few athletic souls disport themselves upon the College's tennis courts, which abutted the site of the replanted maze. At a reasonable hour the ladies retired to shower and change for the buffet dinner which was to precede the dance scheduled as the final activity for the evening.

One cadet claimed that he secreted himself in a room adjoining the room set aside as a change room for the young ladies. By his account they were equally unimpressed with some of their partners, and he claimed to have heard some interesting discussions on the alleged shortfalls of his fellow classmates.

And it appeared that the cosmetic excesses of Second Class generally had the opposite effect to what was intended. He certainly retrieved a bra inadvertently left behind by one of the young ladies, which he later gallantly returned it to her in a bold move intended to inveigle his way into her affections. Her embarrassment was such that the attempt failed dismally.

The evening's dance was alcohol free and closely chaperoned. The predatory nature of some of the cadets came to the fore, and there was some rearrangement of couples as reluctant or unwilling partners sought greener pastures. At least one cadet discovered a partner willing to engage in more stimulating activities than tennis or ballroom dancing, attempting to consummate the relationship in another cadet's room until being discovered by the ever vigilant members of Second Class, and to the everlasting chagrin of his classmate who had made the initial introduction.

At the end of the evening Cadets were permitted to accompany their partners home on the bus. I had been divested of my original partner at some time during the evening, and ended up with a young lady who had either cast off or been abandoned by her original partner.

At her home, I escorted her to the door then spent a cold and miserable forty or so minutes sitting on the kerb side awaiting the bus to return.

I never contacted either of the young ladies again, nor they me. Some of the class however continued to see their partners for some time, and one at least contracted a very happy and successful marriage with a young lady whom he first met at the Tennis Party.

And in the following year when we were supervising our Fourth Class as the next crop of invitees disembarked from the Army bus, there were some awfully familiar faces.

Anyone for tennis?

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