

Great Oaks From Little Acorns Grow

Eastgate remembers the best race of all.

The Honour Code of the Corps of Cadets at West Point, upon which our own modest antipodean version was based, stated that “A cadet does not lie, cheat or steal nor tolerate those who do.” This simple profundity governed the way we approached the travails and burdens of our daily existence.

I mention this because our recent dissertations on the mayhem in the Mess have elicited a response from one of our number, a person whose modest beginnings in the wilds of ANZAC Hall have led him to become one of the most senior and respected logisticians in the land. It was the question as to whether we had paper or linen serviettes which caused him to ponder momentarily how his life may have taken a different turn if he had not become the Toc King of ANZAC Hall.

“Fourth Class taught us to be thieves and scavengers,” he said recently, an utterance which might cause casual readers to draw their breath in shock and to shake their heads in amazement at the preposterousness of it all. Perhaps it is not so astounding as it first appears.

The members of the senior classes led such exhausting lives that Fourth Class were entrusted with the responsibility of providing them with sustenance additional to that taken in the mess at meal times. Some platoons ran to a fund with which Fourth Class could actually buy extra rations, most usually on a Friday night when the sales of raisin toast traditionally peaked. But since funds were always in short supply, Fourth Class preferred a liberal interpretation of General William Tecumseh Sherman’s admonition to his troops during his expedition from Atlanta to the sea; ‘The Army will forage liberally off the land.’

In earlier Duntroon days, the College’s inhabitants very literally observed this sensible advice. In the austere years immediately following World War 2, in the aftermath of official war time rationing, Canberra’s geographic isolation ensured that life’s essentials remained in short supply and exorbitant in cost. Canberra, what we knew as Civic, and the little village of Duntroon were quite separate entities. Shopping for provisions required a trip into town, though the relatively simple journey which we later took for granted was complicated by a lack of suitable public transport and private motor vehicles.

A lateral thinking Commandant, a country boy at heart and a cavalryman to boot who therefore knew how to look a gift horse in the mouth, decided on a simple but practical solution...Married members of the staff were encouraged to establish vegetable plots within the grounds of their married quarters and a modest flock of sheep, some one hundred in number, was allowed to wander at will around the grounds, watering themselves at any dripping tap. Manicuring, masticating and manuring as they went, the combined functions of their perambulations and their digestive systems simultaneously trimmed and fertilised the College’s lawns, and their fleece consistently weighed in at top of the clip when wool was one pound per pound, a nice little earner for the College’s previously depleted Regimental Funds.

A butchery was established to kill and dress meat for local consumption, and to help keep costs down to a minimum, a simple but practical economy. A piggery was established to dispose of swill and scraps, a task which in 1968 had fallen to the patrons of the cadets mess. A demonstration of the greater efficiency of the earlier programme was that it produced pork as a by product, whereas we simply grew leaner on identical fare.

By the time we arrived as cadets, an epidemic of footrot had carried away the College’s sheep, and the gardens of Duntroon had reverted to the decorative rather than vegetative kind. The pigs had

long since passed into pork sausages, and as the keeping of fowls was forbidden, livestock was limited to an amusing collection of canines, plus the odd pre-feral moggy.

Serious foraging for additional sustenance was therefore limited to the bountiful but caveated provisions of the cadets' mess. In this instance it was not the lofty ideals and the scrupulous honesty of the senior classes which was our example, rather we tended towards the more liberal interpretation of communal ownership of state resources as practised by the staff of the CSC Mess.

Some or all of the Mess staff proved much more prolific scavengers than Fourth Class could ever hope to be, occasioned no doubt more by the much greater opportunity and access available to them. One of our number recalls quite early in Fourth Class walking around the rear of the Mess and being more than a little shocked to see the private car of a senior member of the Mess staff with its boot open parked next to the back door while the owner loaded large quantities of food into it.

Even to a wide-eyed innocent from the bush, this seemed highly suspicious behaviour, all the more so as the commodities disappearing into the boot included luxuries such as T-bone steak and half-gallon cans of fruit juice. We were to learn later that these items were actually on the cadets' ration scale, but they were not common fare on our tables in 1968.

Where the Mess staff seemed motivated by greed, we were motivated by starvation.

When the football season started in Canberra, and we added twice weekly intensive training to our already quite physical lifestyles, our near starvation diet started to extract a toll. One of our number, a large, and surprisingly talented front row forward found himself being roundly chastised by his team coach one evening for his less than energetic participation in footy training. His explanation that he had no energy because he was losing weight as a result of insufficient food drew hearty applause from the rest of his fellows and attracted some sharp questioning from the coach.

All involved were all hopeful that the coach's interest might result in larger portions at meal time. But alas, such hopes were rudely dashed. Our bulky prop forward got a chit which entitled him to go through the meal queue twice. The rest of us were compelled to adopt the Raffles solution to cover the shortfall in our own meagre rations and to meet the constant demands of the senior classes.

Jars of spreads and condiments disappeared at a rapid rate, while desperate cadets scoured the bread containers for the odd slice of bread which had escaped disappearing down the maw of ravenous cadets. Wrapped carefully in a paper serviette, these were then placed in one's briefcase for security until they could be added to the general stash in the barracks.

What wondrous mutations occurred in the confines of briefcase, in toc cupboards and in security trunks which were allocated for the storage of such contraband!

Carefully wrapped slices of bread which spent several hours in the company of old notepaper, leaking biro and pencil shavings in the bowels of a brief case gradually absorbed the flavours of their companions. Remembering the old logistic adage to use your oldest stock first, new additions were placed on the bottom of the pile, a paper serviette serving to mark the distinction between old stock, even older stock and indigestible items of purely historical interest. Bread curled as it dried, assuming the consistency of ceramic tiles in the process.

Golden gobs of butter, firm and pristine in chilled, silver butter dishes quickly melted in Canberra's summer heat into pools of rancid, yellow fat. Likewise with cheese, although where butter melted, cheese became hard, dry and cracked. Small furry growths attached themselves to the surfaces of these illicit treasure troves, miraculous living organisms which under other circumstances could kill rabid infections but which could, if ingested, induce gastric distress.. We quickly learned that it was best advised to remove these unwelcome additions before buttering hot toast, which might hopefully otherwise absorb some of the more obvious signs of dairy product decay.

Milk, denied the cooling balm of refrigeration would separate into curds and whey, rendering it unfit for the purpose of adding to a brew. Still, one could always do one's best and try. Observing the principle of waste not, want not, all unconsumed portions of these hard won prizes were carefully stored away lest they be needed in an emergency.

What exotic odours lingered in the hidden recesses of a toc cupboard, usually the wardrobe of an unoccupied room set aside for the purpose of a platoon or section toc room! Stale bread, curdled milk, chunderous cheese with just a hint of mould and putrefaction, burnt toast, International Roast instant coffee powder. Assorted containers of speckled sugar, the small black dots hopefully grains of coffee powder rather than the calling cards of cockroaches. Would it have affected the flavour? How we looked forward to toc!

The bread we burned over single bar heaters not strictly purpose made for the task, but expedient toasters none the less. An inverted iron proved useful in making pikelets or pancakes, although one had to be careful not to get the mixture into the steam vents, from which it could later implant itself permanently into the material of one's uniforms. Water was boiled in ancient filament heated kettles and crockery and cutlery was limited to items on loan from the CSC mess. Occasionally when the mess stock was so depleted that it threatened to disrupt the operation of the mess, an amnesty was declared for the return of such pilfered items.

Despite our careful housekeeping and our rigid stock control, the demands placed on supplies meant that they were regularly depleted. Sugar would be reduced to a few useless grains and it was a sure sign that the instant coffee powder was about to run out when the remnants had concealed into a solid lump in the bottom of the tin, which had to be prized out, and could be broken up into useable portions. As in all successful operations, effective and regular resupply was a major consideration. The insatiable appetites and demands of the senior classes had to be met or there were dire consequences.

The Army used a 1955 British film, *Carrington VC* as a training aid on court martials. The film starred David Niven, himself a graduate of the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, and Kierrimuir's second best known export after the ballad about its ball. Slow horses, fast women and a minor misunderstanding over the whereabouts of the regimental funds result in Carrington tap dancing before the court.

Serious toc gatherers preferred another Niven film for choice of a role model; *Raffles*, the tale of a British aristocrat who whiles his time away as a popular cricket player, but who is actually a secret cat burglar and safecracker. Midnight raids on the Mess a la Raffles and Bunter were a regular occurrence.

The modus operandi was simple. By ensuring that at least one of the easily accessible mess windows was unlocked as we exited the mess after the evening meal, a point of entry was established...For disguise, the Army had thoughtfully issued us with a black tracksuit which was perfectly suited to cat burglary by night. The gratuitous attentions of the senior class cadets had honed our senses to be alert for approaching danger and we were developing advanced skills of escape and evasion.

Raids on the Mess were carried out with the connivance, and in some instances the direct supervision of senior classes. Some preferred to inspect the raiders before departure, while others would carry out Fagin type inspections of the spoils upon return. Some would offer advice as to refinements in dress or technique, for example, black socks worn over our Dunlop Volleys to camouflage their glowing white finish (shape, shine, shadow, surface, silhouette.)

One First Class cadet, a chain smoker, would direct raiders to conduct concurrent reconnaissance in the First and Second Class coffee rooms on the off chance that some careless cadet might have inadvertently left a part consumed packet of fags lying around.

Once inside the mess, we were only limited by our ingenuity and our ability to carry off as much as we could from the cornucopia of comestibles in dry pantries and a massive cold room, allowing for what had already been pilfered by the mess staff and cadets who had raided before us.

Sometimes simultaneous raids occurred, though by chance rather than by design. Our keen observer of the behaviour of the WO Caterer was involved in one such escapade.

Late one night, not long before the May break, a small troop of black-clad Mess raiders from Kapyong infiltrated the pantry area at the back of the Mess. They tip-toed in soundlessly and got the shock of their lives when they bumped into (literally) another group of stealthy raiders.

Panic set in momentarily as both groups thought they had been sprung by the Duty Officer or some such and made a mad rush for the open window. However, they soon realised that if everyone was dressed in black and there were no lights on, their separate purposes were likely to be equally nefarious.

Fortune then smiled on the by now large group. Several cartons of half-gallon cans of pineapple juice were stacked against the wall. On the basis that we had only previously been served minimal quantities of enamel stripping sour orange juice in the several weeks we had been at the College, they surmised that the chances of having this consignment served up at breakfast were not high. By removing it therefore, they were not robbing their fellow cadets, but merely ensuring that the juice got to at least some of its intended recipients.

There was a lot of it, three or four cans per raider and our very own Raffles recalls returning to his Section area to a hero's welcome.

The constant quest for additional sustenance provided a perfect opportunity for the entrepreneurial instincts of a number of cadets. At the heart of this was a need to supplement the meagre incomes which we received, and various money making schemes were devised. Canny cadets devised remarkable ways to have other cadets pay for their skills and services.

First Class taxis offered a cheaper if not more convenient service than Canberra's conventional taxi fleet. Since the junior classes were not permitted to own motor vehicles, First Class found a captive market to help defray the cost of their car loans and their petrol bills. Delivering cadets to and from various entertainments also helped wile away the hours for those First Class cadets unfortunate enough to find themselves on stoppage of leave.

Not only First Class cadets possessed motor vehicles which could be used to turn a profit. Members of other classes, not permitted to own vehicles under the College's rules, kept vehicles throughout Canberra under a variety of arrangements for use on weekends and at other times. Regular checks of the car parks at Russell Offices turned up vehicles whose owners possessed exotic addresses or were registered in the name of cadets. The preferred place to leave a vehicle, if a willing parent of a Canberra cadet couldn't be located, was at Eddington's Farm, located on the ridge immediately south of the Badge Gates.

Old Mrs Eddington was a totally understanding individual with, it transpired, a long association with the motoring enthusiasts amongst the cadets. AT a dining in night in the CS Mess, to which the members of the military board were invited, one table was mortified to be asked by General Tim Vincent if the cadets still kept vehicles at Eddington's Farm. As frantic signals were being despatched to various cadets throughout the Mess, the General let it slip that he himself had kept a Harley Davidson motorcycle there while a cadet to conceal it from the College authorities. He seemed rather pleased to discover that our generation of cadets had kept the tradition alive, but was sworn to secrecy not to reveal this precious secret.

Those cadets who were enthusiastic photographers and who had access to the College's dark room and photo lab closely followed the trials and tribulations which beset us, recording them for posterity

and selling us copies of prints, 'to help defray the costs of developing fluids and photographic paper.' Or so they told us.

Others studied the tonsorial arts, keeping our unruly locks within the demanding standards required by Mr Goldspink and the drillies. They became barbers mostly by trial and error although one enterprising cadet offered to stand in for the College's official barber on Saturdays in return for tutelage and a pair of professional clippers. This allowed the barber, a National Serviceman, to take leave in Sydney on days when he was otherwise rostered to cut cadets' hair. It simultaneously provided his understudy with the necessary funds to purchase his first motor vehicle with which to transport himself to and from the various venues at which he tickled the ivories, earning yet more lovely lucre, particularly if he could convince a few fare paying passengers to accompany him!

The other major source of income was the illicit canteens, from which enterprising merchants dispensed cans of soft drink, lollies and chocolates, which upset the delicate nutritional balance of our official diets. Jamaica Rum chocolate bars were a particular favourite, as were Fruit and Nut and dark chocolate which we wolfed down to supplement the meagre calories which we otherwise received.

Some potential tycoons managed to combine one or more of these enterprises, thus establishing on a more modest scale merchant empires which were the modern equivalent of that of the original owner of Duntroon, Robert Campbell. A canny Scot with a keen eye for quick quid, Campbell's fortune and reputation were made when a shipment of victuals he had organised from South Africa arrived just in the nick of time to ward off impending famine in the garrison. How ironic.

Not everyone aspired to be a member of the merchant class. Some of our more proletarian members, men hewn from solid working class stock and staunch warriors in the class war, preferred to earn extra income by the sweat of their brow and the toil of their hands. Labouring alongside the ordinary workers, they performed such varied tasks as planting seedlings and baking the very bread which sustained the masses in their daily lives. Yet others assisted Morrie the Bogger and his mates in their multitudinous cleaning enterprises in various Government buildings.

Some of this labour was carried out at the neglect of their personal studies, and on occasions, at the expense of their much needed rest, such that they were so spent from their exertions that they were subsequently unable to give their full attentions to their busy programme of studies, particularly in the face of long and erudite dissertations in the model room. Indeed so intense was their desire to earn extra income that one of them, since risen to great rank and responsibility has found it necessary to point out to a fellow West Australian and former drill person, who now finds himself in a much subordinate position to his former charge, that a little more consideration in the face of such obvious exhaustion would have made both their lives so much more bearable at the time.

In our constant search for toc we occasionally stumbled across unexpected treasure troves. Such a discovery led to The Great Strawberry Robbery.

A delivery to the CSC Mess included a consignment of strawberries intended for a function at the Officers' Mess. Strawberries were considered too luxurious to be included in the diets of mere cadets. An inveterate toc scrounger happened by before the strawberries had been taken into the relatively safe haven of the mess cool room. Opportunity simply does not knock twice and the temptation was too much. The strawberries were liberated in a flash.

Not surprisingly, their absence was noted, and a hue and cry ensued. Investigations were caused to be made and the finger of suspicion was pointed at a number of likely culprits who faced disciplinary hearings.