

EASTER REC CAMP

In which Eastgate recalls the Easter Bunny and the recreational sojourn which wasn't.

THE 16-week no leave rule meant Fourth Class could not proceed on Easter Leave with the rest of the Corps.

Because Easter was only a relatively short break, those cadets who lived some distance from the college did not necessarily use the opportunity to travel to their homes. Sydney and Melbourne were popular destinations, and the cadets who lived in these cities invariably were burdened with "visiting" cadets who couldn't otherwise make the long journey home.

Economical with the use of time, the college authorities also decided to use the break to allow Fourth Class to suffer the worst of the adverse effects of compulsory vaccinations in our own time rather than theirs.

We had been regularly poked and probed since our arrival, firstly to prevent us contracting the otherwise preventable diseases which apparently proliferated at Point Hut, such as tetanus and foot rot.

Those jabs and inoculations which were essential to bring us to DP1 standard so that we could be deployed overseas at a moment's notice, particularly the vaccination against smallpox, which had to be rife as a pre-requisite for choosing a foreign clime in which to wage war.

We were guinea pigs in the manner of inmates in the worst of the German concentration camps. The Army acquired an experimental hydraulic inoculator which they tested on us before releasing it upon the Army at large. Relatively painless at the moment of injection, it inflicted a severe shock several minutes later, causing even the most hardy to collapse or cry out in sudden pain.

Smallpox, or rather its antidote cowpox, was delivered in the time honoured manner.

A droplet of the serum was placed on the upper left arm and the skin surface scratched with, one assumed, a sterile needle. A pustulant lesion developed over the following days causing one's glands to swell and a considerable degree of pain and discomfort. Those of us who had been vaccinated before arrival were spared a full repetition of the effects and were therefore thankful for small mercies.

Roger Elston had been reliably informed that the rapid application of soap and exceedingly hot water could neutralise the effect of the cowpox serum and, having been inoculated, raced to the showers in his block to out the damned spot as directed with a brisk application of his nail brush. He had been misinformed, for his arm became infected from his shoulder to his elbow where he had spread the serum in a futile attempt to avoid its consequences. Delirious from the effects of bovine fevers he was hospitalised therefore avoiding what followed for the rest of us. His misery was compounded by the sinking in New Zealand of the inter island ferry *Wahini* on an Easter voyage, and he deliriously imagined all his family had been aboard.

Although the college facilities closed down, not all cadets went on leave. The most notable exceptions were the four First Class cadets who had received flying training

scholarships with the Canberra Aero Club and who used the Easter period as their first opportunity for intensive flying training. Senior Class Cadets who had defied one or other of the myriad college regulations and who had been awarded confinement to barracks or stoppage of leave as a punishment for their transgressions normally found themselves "volunteers" to attend the major Easter activity, the Fourth Class Recreation Camp. Being involuntary attendees through the forced loss of their leave, they were generally noted for their lack of enthusiasm and generosity of spirit towards Fourth Class, for whom bastardisation was still at its height.

Given the intensity of the "bastardisation", any respite from the senior classmen was a welcome relief.

Whatever euphoria might have accompanied any break from the college routine was cruelly shattered the night before the rest of the Corps went on leave. It also happened that the Wednesday before Easter was the day the college held one of the most significant events on the sporting calendar, the Inter-Company Cross Country.

This was a gruelling affair up the side of Mount Ainslie and down through the sheep paddocks of the Close Training Area. It finished on the square. The Company jocks combed the new intake for cross country running talent and goaded the less athletic towards greater achievements, which from my perspective at least was simply a refinement of the whole process of bastardisation. I clearly remember Marcus Bromet pushing me around the college grounds late at night in a futile attempt to goad a couple of extra inches per hour out of my hopeless running. I hope it made him feel better. It did nothing for me.

The course was set out by the PTI and the legion of extra officials briefed and armed for their many tasks. At various check points each cadet was marked with a different coloured marker pen to indicate at the finish line that he had completed the whole course.

At the finish line, the runners were given a card indicating the position they had run, which were then collected into company lots so that each company's total score could be calculated. The company with the least points was the winner.

For some reason the RSM and drillies were congregated at the finish line. The Infantry Wing and the hoi polloi got the more remote and dangerous tasks. Each company had its own allocated drillie who was part of the company organisation, and even in those frozen hearts beat a modicum of company spirit, for they would cheer their own company's cadets.

In 1968 I do not remember any of the staff running, although in later years, particularly when Rollo Brett had arrived as Adjutant, he regularly competed. It was an event for the fleet of foot, and the majority of us merely followed behind in the rapidly disappearing footsteps of the likes of Peter Rose, Kev O'Brien and our own class star, Joff Johnson. Even the mighty Rudy Irgang, who won everything else athletic, including the Silver Boomerang on multiple occasions, was not a serious contender for cross country champion.

The cross country was not for the faint hearted. For some of us it was enough to finish in the allotted time. Others put in super human efforts and paid the penalties. Everyone was caught up in the moment of the occasion. I remember one of the drillies directing a congratulatory roar at one of his cadets, "Well done, Mister Bloggs, Well done!" The cadet in question was at the time depositing the undigested portion of the

day's lunch, a pre-race can of coke and a chocolate bar over the spit polished toes of the drillie's boots, AB.

Most of the companies held some sort of post cross country gathering. Often these were held in the bush behind the company barrack blocks where alcohol could be surreptitiously consumed in unobserved surrounds, and where the first portent of Canberra's bitter winter might be warded off with a bonfire.

The victorious company would boisterously celebrate its win; the losers down their sorrows with a promise of better luck next time. It was usually the first occasion where new Fourth Class cadets were encouraged to socialise on a relatively informal basis with senior class cadets, the illicit consumption of alcohol adding a sense of shared mutual defiance and camaraderie.

Weary, suffused with pride, no doubt pleasantly seduced by the first fleeting gestures of friendship and acceptance extended to them, lulled into a totally false sense of security, Fourth Class would collapse into the familiar embrace of their beds with the knowledge that there would be no defaulters parade in the morning and with the prospect of a few pleasant days away from the ministrations of particularly the Second Class cadets.

Few were awake any longer than it took for their heads to hit their pillows.

On the third stroke of midnight, by the time-call broadcast on the ABC, every Fourth Class cadet had deposited over his person one "bish" tin full of cold water. This unexpected and unwelcome intrusion into what would have been for the majority of cadets the first deep and untroubled sleep since their arrival at Duntroon had immense consequences, for the perpetrators of the treacherous deed were immediately revealed.

As the soaked cadets stumbled and tumbled from their rooms, senior class cadets were loudly calling the names of Fourth Class cadets from other companies. Instruments for retribution were fortunately and conveniently at hand. Fire extinguishers and fire hoses which senior class cadets had thoughtfully removed from their brackets on the barracks walls were thrust into willing and vengeful hands.

The other bits connected to the hands were directed in the general direction of the alleged culprits, with a stern reminder that individual and collective honour was at stake, and Fourth Class were now expected to do their bit.

To make matters worse, those allegedly responsible for the outrage, devoid of shame or remorse, were standing their ground in front of their own barrack block equally armed with fire hose and bucket, defiantly prepared for further combat.

Battle was immediately joined.

It seemed that the miscreants had ranged far and wide, for other souls seeking revenge were engaged in the act of tipping bedding out the windows of the perpetrators rooms. Cop that you scoundrels! What? Put a bit of water into their bedding? Splendid idea, and the full force of the counter attacking fire hoses were directed at the tumbling bedding. By now it had started to dawn on Fourth Class that they were being had, for a glance over the shoulders of Revenge Force would have seen an identical scene of bedding being jettisoned from widows unfolding.

By the time weary, slightly befuddled minds had registered that all was not what it seemed to be, it was too late. To make matters worse, upon returning to their rooms, Forth Class discovered that these had been locked during their unexpected absence. It

took some time to clear up wet bedding, wrecked rooms, frayed tempers so that when finally a dry sleeping bag was produced, it was a very tired and emotional Fourth Class who attempted for the second time that night to get some sleep. Not all slept, and many a vigil was kept over room doors until a not totally welcome dawn heralded the new day.

Breakfast was a tense affair, for although many Fourth Class had worked out what had occurred, a few still harboured the suspicion that they had been betrayed by their own classmates. Several potential conflicts were avoided through careful intervention by senior cadets, but suspicion lingered on. By lunchtime, those going on leave had left leaving a suspicious and wary Fourth Class to complete the tidy up from the night before and to prepare for the delights of Rec Camp.

At the instigation of the remaining senior classmen, there were a couple of punitive raids by Fourth Class Cadets not fully convinced that they hadn't been attacked by their own. These were more in the way of venting a little frustration over the previous night's activities, and were soon under control. But there is a God, and one of the First Class flying cadets received karma at his own hands, a justly deserved retribution for his part in the Easter Bunny and subsequent events.

Returning late from a night's carousing, he was having trouble with his preparations for bed.

His trousers kept fouling his ankles, causing him to stumble and fall. By the time he had finally undressed and had fallen into bed, it seemed that the bed had gone into an uncontrolled spin. The occupant was feeling a little green. Staggering to the door of his room, he jettisoned his load into the corridor, his befuddled brain assuring itself that Fourth Class would look after it in the morning. Temporarily at least restored, he finally retired to bed.

The following morning he rose a little late and ventured a nervous inspection of the corridor outside his room. Fortuitously it seemed Fourth Class had "looked after it" and he able to perform his morning ablutions without first having to resolve the previous evening's difficulties.

When he opened his wardrobe door to select something to wear flying that day, he discovered that the previous evening he had in fact got his room door and his wardrobe door confused, and in his haste had opened the wrong one. His entire wardrobe was spoiled, as was his previous euphoria at having apparently avoided the consequences of correcting his indiscretions. Fourth Class were immediately called for and had the distasteful task of helping the wretch "look after it."

On the Easter Thursday morning, Fourth Class set out for Rec Camp, which was to be held by a lake at Narooma on the NSW south coast. We would simply camp in our field gear, congregating in platoon and company groups. I seem to remember that I hutchied up with Joff Johnson and Vic Gibbons, but I am sure that as the only other Fourth Class in my section, Mick Roseblade was there as well. I took a fruit cake that my mother had made, as well as a parcel of Easter goodies that she had packed by Mr Hazzard, the greengrocer from our local corner store. We would pool our goodies. Mr Hazzard had thoughtfully placed a bag of prunes in before the sticky lollies and chocolate eggs. It was a sensible move.

Our chaperone for the camps was the College Adjutant, Captain Paul Mensch. He had only recently returned from Vietnam and was still single, a condition which seemed to be placed on the Adjutant's position in those days. We took with us a pool of

equipment from the various College activity groups including sailing boats and canoes. A flat bottomed Army assault boat was fitted with a bracket for an outboard motor to be used as a ski boat.

On the Saturday night we decided that we felt like a beer. Many of us had not actually drunk much beer at that stage, but it seemed like a pretty Easter Rec Camp blokey sort of craving. Certainly those who had drunk beer and knew about such things said that they felt like a beer, so who were we to disagree? Johnson had lots of older brothers, and was wise about such things. He was also from NSW and therefore geographically astute and volunteered to go into the nearest town and fetch some beer back to the camp.

We pooled our meagre funds and he set off on what we all believed was a short walk along the beach to the pub and return. Chris Galvin accompanied him. At about 0130, they finally returned to the camp with the beer. Along the way they had either encountered a brief shower, or the condensation from the cold cans had rendered the cardboard carton into a soggy pulp.

It no longer performed the purpose for which it was intended and they had had to struggle with arms full of slippery cans. The experience had left them both in decidedly ill humour, with Galvin's temperature rapidly increasing at a rate beyond even that of the beer, which was by now warm.

We had tired of waiting for them and had dozed off by the time they returned.

This slumber had removed our appetite for beer so, no thanks, we didn't feel like one now. We had some experience of Johnson's notoriously short temper by now, but we quickly discovered that if they had bothered to walk all the way into bloody town and back again then we were bloody well going to have a beer and we were bloody well going to enjoy it!

I produced the fruit cake, and we had an early morning snack of fruit cake and Toohey's Flag Ale that was very nice, thank you very much. We slept the sleep of the dead.

Elsewhere in the camp another small group was enjoying an illicit late night drink.

My fellow Bundabergian John Hartmann had accumulated a modest stockpile of our home town's most famous export. An old school friend had been concerned the Army may have been neglecting an holistic approach to John's spiritual needs. Thoughtfully he sent regular supplies by mail secreted within detergent bottles to hide the true nature of their contents. To avoid accidental discovery Harty further secreted the bottles behind the metal fascia plates which concealed the pipes which fed the accommodation blocks' central heating system.

Estimates vary as to the actual amount of the spirit he had received. Harty felt that he had about 40 ounces of the fiery spirit cached around his room. Bonny Clyde, whose assessment is based on a completely different set of empirical standards, estimates several gallons. Whatever the amount, Harty feared that discovery of his stock would result in dire consequences and he embarked upon a perfectly reasonable and logical method to dispose of the potentially damning evidence.

In my formative years it was my custom upon waking to gaze from my bedroom window to marvel at the world beyond. Chief among those edifices which graced that near horizon were the buildings which comprised the Bundaberg Rum Distillery, Whittred Street, East Bundaberg. Occasionally one's nose would detect the faint

odour of fermenting molasses, the essential process which presages the distillation of the rum itself. What was left over was turned into Vegemite. I digress.

One's Uncle William was actually the general manager at the distillery so that whenever one's uncles gathered, chief amongst the rituals of the secret men's business they conducted was to carry out some quality control of Uncle Bill's latest product, provided courtesy of the gentleman himself. It was a drink, they believed, to be diluted at a ratio of three to one with tank water, then chilled before drinking.

Caution had to be exercised in the quantity drunk, for the fiery spirit effected wondrous changes upon the personalities of otherwise mild mannered men. Small amounts made already avuncular fellows even more jolly. Too much spelled trouble but years of practice made them cautious in their intake.

Regularly at family Christmas gatherings when Santa arrived, it would seem that he too had been spending a few moments with the men folk. Indeed it caused my cousin Linnie to confide to Santa, who seemed to be able to do a pretty fair imitation of Uncle Bill's speech mannerisms as well, that he 'smelled just like Daddy!' I digress again.

I mention these things merely because a note of caution may have been helpful at Narooma in 1968 in preventing what followed. With some foresight, Harty had brought a modest amount of Coca Cola to dilute the rum and to make it more acceptable to immature palates. The Coke soon ran out, probably at the point where abandon replaced caution.

Anxious to rid himself of his illegal possession, Harty encouraged the others to help him dispose of it, and none more enthusiastically approached the task than the young Clyde, Queensland born and bred and therefore naturally immune from the more harmful effects of over indulgence of his home state's national drink. He regularly proffered his cup, canteen to have it filled from Harty's seemingly inexhaustible supply of now raw, undiluted spirit.

Disaster ensued. Time has thankfully erased the more painful memories from young Clyde's memories but he caused more than a few moments anxiety to his fellows.

In extremis and without the supreme unction that his condition and his faith demanded, he insisted that his remains be cast into the sea, as was the custom in such cases in his home town Mackay.

There it was believed that the practice was therapeutic, hastening the onset of sobriety. Bonney simply craved a swift end to his misery.

It was touch and go for some time after the rum had finally been consumed. There was even some momentary discussion as to whether the Adjutant should be informed of the potential disaster which threatened to cast a dark pall over the other enjoyments of our lake side sojourn. Finally a sadder but wiser young man emerged from the crisis of health which had threatened to consume him. To this day Bonney has faithfully observed the pledge he made to himself when coherency returned some several days later. Don't ever drink Bundaberg Rum.

The camp was taken up with water sports and attempting to do as little as possible, particularly by those bedridden by the effects of their smallpox vaccination. The absence of bastardising senior classmen was absolute bliss, and the few involuntary attendees, considerably outnumbered, decided that discretion was the better part of valour and left us well alone.

I learned to water ski. Our flat bottomed assault boat was powered by a 40hp Johnson outboard and could get up sufficient speed to tow one skier on double skis. It was not as flash as some of the boats plying the lake, but once we had found our feet, some of the other boat owners offered us rides on their far more powerful craft. I had no trouble at all getting up on the skis on my first attempt. As I was zipping along the waters surface I looked down. The lake was full of jelly fish.

My next biggest problem was how to get off, for I was determined not to fall amongst these loathsome creatures. In the end the boat solved the problem for me, as the engine suddenly lost power. The driver managed to get me close to shore and I exited the water post haste.

One other cadet was not so lucky.

Glen Dower had been paddling around in a canoe when it was swamped by a much larger and considerably more powerful speed boat. The canoe was inundated with water and soon immersed to its gunwales in the middle of the lake. Dower refused to leave the stricken craft and resisted all attempts at rescue, spurning even the offer of assistance from the owner of the craft that had caused his misfortune.

The Adjutant was summoned, but Dower steadfastly remained in the canoe, insisting only that he would go down with his ship.

Dower, who left the College at the end of our first year, was also the main player in the other most memorable event of Easter Rec camp. Dower was hutchying up with Andre Dupont, but the only two vacant trees he could find were closer together than the full width of the hutchie shelter. In his frustration Dower shouted out to Hughie the universal deity, "You hate me, don't you!"

Receiving no immediate answer he then responded in what was a fair impersonation of one of RSM Goldspink's favourite phrases; "Well, answer!"

Immediately a large bolt of lightning struck the ground in the near vicinity of the camp. This ominous sign of divine displeasure rattled even the normally irreverent and eccentric Dower, but it had an incalculable effect upon the devout young Dupont, a good chopper who relied upon a reliquary of totems, charms and relics to ward off evil and protect him from the untoward intentions of the irreligious.

Obviously shaken by their experience the two continued with the erection of their humble edifice, Dower reflecting upon the possible long term negative effects of his inattention to matters spiritual and Dupont smug in the knowledge that a life of moral rectitude, strict religious observance and a regular attendance at Mass would inevitably lead to a just reward.

On Easter Monday, collectively and individually refreshed, we returned to the college for whatever might follow.

It was journey of explicit discovery.