Now for something completely different...

OUR HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

or

"What are we doing here?"

Eastgate remembers how it all began.

The main body of the Queensland contingent finally gathered on Brisbane's South Brisbane Railway Station late in the afternoon of Thursday, 25th January 1968.

The journey to Canberra entailed an overnight trip to Sydney where we would connect with a Canberra train. Since the Canberra connection did not leave until late the following night, we would of necessity have to spend the whole day in Sydney. The rear party, consisting of Clyde and Hartmann, having to travel much greater distances from the deep north than we sophisticates who had joined in Brisbane, would follow a couple of days later.

We had been processed at Enoggera Barracks that day, when we were given our regimental numbers and some spending type money to tide us over. I am tempted to think that it may have been travelling allowance to cover the period we spent in Sydney, but I am sure that it would have been taken out of our meagre allowance once the Army started to pay us. Although it was in reality only a few dollars, it seemed a small fortune to someone who had never earned a wage before. It certainly went further in 1968 than it would today.

The departure from the old South Brisbane station was an emotional occasion for those whose families were in Brisbane. The train was the overnight express, which meant that it did not stop at quite as many stations as the Mail, which stopped at every station. The carriages were far from luxurious, and poorly heated, and thus were bitterly cold in the early morning pre dawn. They were also quite uncomfortable, and as the Army did not provide us with sleepers, we were required to sit (second class) all the way.

The families of the Brisbane cadets had been at the station to farewell their sons, while the rest of us, country boys as we were and therefore made of sterner stuff, were spared the embarrassing farewells and gratuitous advice which mothers particularly seem to proffer on such occasions.

It also gave us the first opportunity to observe our fellow cadets, at least those from our home state of Queensland. Some of us had met briefly during selection boards, and others were acquainted through school or other organisations. It was clear that the cadets from Brisbane clearly regarded themselves as more sophisticated than us simple country blokes, and initially treated us with a certain degree of disdain.

There may have been good reason for this, for they were undoubtedly more sophisticated than us in a number of matters. It may have been that we had all said our farewells in our home towns before journeying to Brisbane, and that in the absence of family and friends, we seemed to be some sort of social outcast while the Brisbane cadets were farewelled by emotional throngs.

One callow but hirsute youth in particular had a most tearful and passionate departure from a young lady who must have been his girlfriend. We were safely able to deduce

this for those were the days when cadets were forbidden from marrying. This caveat aside, the farewell was so passionate that if the relationship had not so far been consummated, then there was a distinct possibility that it was going to be then and there on the platform of the South Brisbane station.

This was despite the presence of his parents, and his grandmother, not to mention the large crowd of interested though not necessarily approving spectators. The mother of at least one cadet, unimpressed by this public display of affection placed her son such that his back was to the scene, and his innocent mind thus protected from the unaccustomed sight of unrestrained passion.

This touching scene would have no doubt brought back wistful memories of bitter sweet parting from girlfriends for others of the new cadets, and even created a touch of envy in some. For my part, I was guilt ridden by memories bitter rather than sweet, for I had done the cowardly thing to a most delightful young lady whose existence I had suddenly become aware of in my last year at school, and with whom I became involved in an intense, though platonic, relationship. Unable to understand let alone explain my emotions at the prospect of a prolonged separation, I had opted for the Foreign Legion solution and simply run away.

When the train finally departed, the tragic figure of our new classmate waved pathetically out the window as the train rounded the curve in the platform on its journey south. Sobbing as if his heart would break, he strained out the window for one desperate last glimpse of his true love. In our embarrassment, the rest of us averted our gazes as this heart rending tableau played itself out. As soon as the platform was out of sight, he abandoned his window and rushed off in search of, we assumed, one final glimpse from one of the later carriages.

We were therefore somewhat surprised to find him not long after in an equally passionate embrace with another young lady with whom he had just become acquainted. He had thoughtfully draped his sports coat over their entwined forms so as not to offend the sensibilities of the other passengers in the carriage. This would be the first of many young ladies whose affections he would trifle with, and whose hearts he would break over the coming four years. For my part, even had I been bold enough to be so forward with a young lady with whom I had only just become acquainted, I did not at that stage own a sports coat.

The rest of the train journey was relatively uneventful. We may have played cards as was our habit on subsequent journeys, but I have no specific recollection save that our romantic fellow and his new lady friend remained entwined beneath his sports coat for the entire journey, before disappearing together for the entire free day we had in Sydney.

It was Australia Day, and I do remember being taken with the significance of being at Circular Quay, where the European settlement of Australia had been proclaimed one hundred and eighty years before to the day.

I also remember that it was the first occasion that I was legally able to go into a hotel for a drink, the legal drinking age in sinful New South Wales then being eighteen as opposed to twenty one in Queensland. I was in the company of Lionel Haynes who, apart from being a sophisticated city boy, was also six foot six and therefore had been able to frequent pubs for some time, since his immense height more than compensated for his immature age. The event occurred in the Hampton Court Hotel in Kings Cross, a suburb of Sydney that we would come to know quite well during our subsequent

visits to Sydney over the next four years. The pub was still there when I went to Sydney recently but there was no plaque on the wall to record this not inconsiderable milestone in my life.

We had been unchaperoned on our journey from Brisbane to Sydney, but from Sydney to Canberra we had an Army pilot, a Captain, as Draft Conducting Officer for the last part of our journey. We also had sleepers, but the train from Sydney to Canberra was a mail train which stopped at every station along the way. It left late at night and arrived at Canberra just before dawn. We were grateful for the sleepers.

We finally arrived at the Canberra station early in the morning of Saturday, 27 January 1968. It was still dark when the train arrived, and some were still a little befuddled from the privations of the journey if not from the excesses of the previous day. Even in the middle of summer, Canberra can be bitterly cold in the pre dawn. Apart from the versatility it apparently afforded in romantic matters, I wished that I had a coat to ward off the chill.

We were met at the station by a nice gentleman, who was quite tall, and who very amiably showed us to our bus, and called us "gentlemen." He was in uniform, and as he wore the badges of a Warrant Officer Class One and carried a pace stick, we naturally assumed that he was the Regimental Sergeant Major. His pleasant demeanour augured well for our time at Duntroon, we thought.

There was one mild exception. The chap who stumbled off the train with his tie askew and a cigarette jammed in the corner of his mouth received a rather curt rebuke from the tall gentleman, being told to straighten himself up. Since the miscreant's own father was a distinguished former RSM, perhaps he should not have been so surprised, for the person in charge of our reception was none other then the Regimental Sergeant Major of the Corps of Staff Cadets himself, Warrant Officer Class One Norman Goldspink.

Although we didn't realise it then, this man was the one person who, more than any other member of the College staff, would influence almost every aspect of our lives as cadets. He was the first person most of us met when we arrived, he witnessed or participated in almost all of the formal events of our passage through Duntroon and he was there for our graduation, leaving the College with us.

Other than the mild rebuke, the reception was quite civil, and it was 'gentlemen do this' and 'gentlemen do that' as we dragged our meagre belongings (including the obligatory iron and texta colour) from the train to the awaiting bus which would transport us to the College.

We had our first glimpse of Canberra's planned orderliness as we drove through the breaking dawn to the College, and soon we were entering by the display of badges that marked the main entrance to Duntroon, and which would become so familiar to us.

The other new cadets, who had arrived in the preceding days, were asleep on stretchers in the gym, and we dumped our possessions in our rooms before being fed and then led to our next appointment, which was with the Adjutant in the MI Block to be attested. For reasons which were to become devastatingly clear in about four weeks time, we were advised not to disturb the senior cadets in the accommodation blocks.

The Officer who performed the ceremony was the College's Adjutant Captain Paul Mench, who had recently returned from Vietnam where he had commanded the Reinforcement Unit at Nui Dat. His Company Sergeant Major had been Max Kelly, who lived a couple of doors down from me in Bundaberg. Max had asked Mench to look out for me on arrival, and he very kindly passed on the message as requested. Such familiarity augured well, or so I thought!

Something untoward must have happened to the RSM while we were being attested because immediately after we had completed the formalities, his voice rose several octaves and several decibels and he began shouting at us, ending the relative cordiality of his pre-dawn greeting. It was clear we were now in the Army, and that this gentleman was in the mood to make sure that we understood that perfectly. Now that we were actually in the Army, we were to be issued with the first of our clothing and equipment.

We would later discover that there were a number of staff at Duntroon who had been there for many years, indeed there were some who had been specifically recruited into the Army for service at Duntroon. One of these long serving soldiers was Corporal "Snow" Wilton, one of two Wiltons serving in the Army at that time and far more important to we cadets than the other one, General Sir John. Snow Wilton's empire was the clothing store, and he was profoundly deaf. We did not know this when we entered the clothing store for the first time.

"Snow" and his cronies flung items of clothing into our arms in sizes that bore no relation to our actual physical dimensions, literally deaf to our entreaties that shirts and or trousers were too large or too small, too short or too long. His habitual response to such allegations was "it'll shrink" or "it'll stretch" or "swap it with your mate."

This latter was the best advice, since Snow seemed capable of giving each individual cadet totally inappropriate sizes while still satisfying the collective need. Lionel Haynes and I came to a mutually satisfactory arrangement as the uniforms issued to me were a correct fit for his six foot six frame, while the uniforms issued for my five foot six and half frame fitted him perfectly.

We quickly learned that it was no good to criticise Snow, for although he was pathologically incapable of hearing 'Size 36 please', or 'Size eight and a half' he could sense a cadet whispering mild obscenities in frustration at a hundred paces, when he would call to the RQMS, "Sir, the cadets are swearing at me!"

We were issued with a mountain of clothing and equipment. Pyjamas for both summer and winter, shirts, collars, razors, brushes and items such as underpants of a style which had gone out of fashion sometime during the Boer War.

Equipped with a new wardrobe, we now required the essential tools of our new trade. From a small store situated underneath HQ CSC, which we would in time discover was better known to the cadets as "Panic Palace,' an ancient Staff Sergeant and an almost equally ancient corporal issued each of us with an SLR complete with CES, and a set of webbing which when assembled was known in the cadet argot as "poop."

We would soon learn to exist in the field in relative comfort for many days from what we could stuff into our "poop," although for some it would be worn more frequently on defaulters parades than in the field. It also served a useful purpose as an acceptable substitute for etchings when attempting to entice young ladies into one's room, although its use for such nefarious activities was then a long way off.

Somewhere in the process we were also issued with a pair of canvas gaiters, whose purpose seemed to be to stop snakes from getting in your Boots, AB or up your trouser legs. Although they were about to be rendered obsolete by the recently developed one piece Boots, GP, which combined all the functions of a pair of Boots AB and gaiters and had the added advantage that they provided protection against panji stakes, these gaiters must have been of considerable value to the Army's logistic organisation.

Of all the items the Army would issue me in its bountiful munificence during my career, it was these seemingly insignificant items alone plus my web belt that were demanded to be returned when I was being discharged almost a quarter of a century later. If I had known of their true value and of the trust that the Army had vested in me to look after them, I would have taken more care of them at the time.

However, in January 1968 we were all blissfully unaware of their future importance, and thus equipped we were now ready to proceed on the next phase of our military education. Point Hut beckoned.

It was fairly obvious that we wouldn't need all of our newly issued clothing during our basic training, so we were allowed to take the unneeded portion of it to our rooms, where we had also left our suitcases, our civilian clothes and our innocence. Taking only what we would need for our four weeks basic training at Point Hut, a picnic spot on the Murrumbidgee some miles out of Canberra, we again boarded the College's buses for the journey bound, we believed, for great adventure.

This was in the middle of one of the hottest summers on record in Canberra. At that time, Canberra was plagued every summer by small black flies. It was said that the National salute was the Canberra wave attempting to get rid of these small black pests. They bred on sheep, and Point Hut was a sheep property owned, I have since discovered, by the war hero, historian, author and ex member of parliament, Jo Gullett, MC.

Flies, heat, war heroes and picnics aside, nothing could prepare us for the welcome we received on arrival at Point Hut.