SECONDS OUT, ROUND TWO!

In which Eastgate recalls the mother of all battles...

APART from the malevolent attentions of the senior classes, there were others who seemed intent on doing us harm.

We had our introduction to Warrant Officer Class One Basil Thomas Webster Waters and his henchmen at Point Hut, where their attempts to beat our puny bodies into shape had not always been mutually appreciated.

Mr Waters, known as BTW was a College institution and he held an unusual distinction in the Army organisation.

For some years, administrative control of the Army's physical training instructors had devolved to the Royal Australian Artillery, and all PTI's wore the badge of that Corps. BTW was the lone exception. An infantryman who had served in Korea, Mr Waters insisted upon retaining that Corps' affiliation, steadfastly refusing to change.

He had established for himself a nice little sinecure at the College and with the patronage of some of those graduates who had passed through his hands, he was allowed to remain the Army's sole infantryman PTI. Like many of his contemporaries, it was his secret but thus far, unfulfilled ambition to go to Vietnam to serve with "The Team".

By a defect of speech, Mr Waters was unable to pronounce correctly the letter "R", which he usually rendered as "W." In the limited opportunity to find revenge for the perceived injustices being perpetrated against us, we Fourth Class took every opportunity to mimic Mr Water's affliction, though never, it must be emphasised, in his immediate pwesence.

Mr Waters had two malicious and muscle bound sidekicks, initially Sergeant Clive Matheson and Bombadier Graeme Trethewey and then Sergeants Hislop and Peter Cochran, later a NSW MP. They cajoled us into endless repetitions of physical jerks employing a variety of implements of torture, particularly vertical wopes suspended from a bar exactly 16 feet above the ground.

Mr Water's inventory was not limited to wopes. He had logs, poles and artillery shells as well as the usual medicine balls, Indian clubs and pawallel bars familiar to habitués of gymnasiums and the like. He also had an overwhelming fondness for a device known as the beam, upon which one heaved. For variety one not only heaved but also simultaneously wotated one's legs until one's insteps touched the said beam.

Mr Waters and his team took an inordinate interest in our physical development. They took notes of our height and weight, and of the size of our chests deflated and inflated. They measured the height of our standing reach against the gymnasium wall and then the extension we could manage from a standing leap.

They recorded at regular intervals the number of push ups we could do without a break and the number of times we could step up and off a low bench in a set time. They also required us to run a mile each term, exactly four times round the old cinders track at the College athletics complex, and they would faithfully record the time that it took each of us to do so. Woe betide the cadet whose timing did not impwove, or worse, actually deteriowated.

For normal PT periods we wore a white T-shirt and blue cotton shorts with a thin red stripe along the seam, the College colours, plus white woollen socks and Dunlop Volley sandshoes and of course the obligatory jock strap. The Army's choice of footwear has left a legacy of shin splints, fallen arches and assorted crippling injuries which allows many of us to draw

modest pensions from the Department of Veterans' Affairs, or to have various failed joints replaced with artificial equivalents. Then, the same items were seen as being excellent for our physical development.

For battle PT we wore jungle green trousers, leather soled Boots AB and gaiters, eschewing shirts so that we could display our developing physiques for all to see, even in mid winter.

Importantly, it allowed splinters from Mr Waters' ancient and deteriorating paraphernalia to embed themselves in our much abused flesh, and to tear snippets of skin on jagged edges. More importantly in winter, we could rest our naked chests on the frozen bitumen of the basketball courts or upon the ice on the beams as we performed a few warm up exercises before we got down to the main purpose of the pewiod.

Mr Waters was a hard taskmaster who set and demanded high standards. Some classmates enjoyed demonstrating their athletic prowess, and were usually therefore not the ones upon whom BTW would vent his spleen. Muscle bound oafs of a kindred spirit with the thwee PTI's, they would sneer in sympathy at we lesser mortals for whom physical exertions were physical and mental trials.

For any infraction during one of his woutines, Mr Waters would demand "Thwee times up the wopes!" and up the wopes we would weluctantly go. It was a pity he didn't ask us to do push-ups, because for other reasons we were becoming very good at those!

The College held an annual tournament called the Novice Boxing Championship. In previous years cadets of all classes had been allowed to compete.

The trophy for the heavyweight division had been originally presented by one Captain AG Thompson. By 1968 the popularity of boxing as a sport had somewhat diminished, and the Thompson Cup was now presented to the best novice boxer as determined by the Senior PTI after a series of public, elimination gladiatorial conquests by weight divisions.

Members of all classes still participated in the Novice Boxing; First Class judged the contests, Second Class acted as the ring and ringside officials and Third Class stwapped and acted as seconds to their Fourth Class charges, whose role it was to bleed to satisfy the blood lust of everyone else.

Mr Waters and his staff had the responsibility of pweparing us for the contest. When a PT pewiod had been allocated to boxing training, there would be pairs of boxing gloves in numbers equal to the size of the class in rows upon the gymnasium floor. These gloves were undoubtedly of considerable age, and were redolent of old leather, sweat, blood and other substances that they had ingested during many years of wegular use. We each would don a pair of gloves and, shaping up in the approved manner, we would prwepare ourselves for the ordeal which followed.

For some cadets it was their first encounter with the mysteries of pugilistic arts. We were shown the rudiments of defence and taught the mysteries of how and where to punch one's opponent, and where not to. Footwork was an essential component of the whole, and we were taught how to stand and how to lead, withdraw and balance as we blocked, parried and deflected blows and returned in kind.

The PTIs explained to us how the torso was divided into quarters which, when added to the face were the areas which attracted points when hit They also indicated those parts of the body which, when hit, disqualified a punch as a foul. They showed us how we should aim our blows to make scoring punches. It had an eerie similarity to firing at the Figure 11 silhouette targets upon which we had learned to shoot. It did not auger well.

We trained in pairs with one offering a jab and the other blocking. This caused a crisis of conscience for some of us, because already we had enough problems in life without being enforced to engage in fisticuffs with our own classmates. But fight we must and thus it was we found ourselves squaring up against someone roughly our own weight and height.

To test the direction and effect of our punches, one's partner was required to hold a stuffed leather covered cylinder about two feet across and six inches deep attached to two rope handles. One held this punching bag at head height while one's partner pummelled it in accordance with strict guidelines laid down by the Marquess of Queensberry and as interpreted by BTW and his fellow thugs.

Timidity on the part of either partner invariably attracted one of the PTIs, who would step up to the offending cadet, throwing one or two fierce punches in his direction. We would then be required to demonstrate that we had recognised our deficiencies and had now corrected them. Sometimes one would first have to rise from the gymnasium floor before doing so.

Occasionally a punch would breach the defences placed in its way and strike an unintended blow. Such connections were inevitable but given the other vicissitudes in our life, they were not always received with the grace nor forgiveness one should have expected, and a response was offered. Such flare ups were thankfully rare, for the bonds of class were beginning to firm.

Inevitably though, the moment of truth would arrive and we would have to demonstrate our new found prowess in public contest.

The percentage of the population who have actually stepped into a boxing ring with serious intent is probably minuscule. I am sure that there are those who do so willingly and who derive immense satisfaction from going fifteen rounds with someone of their own size. Some may even get some sensual satisfaction from the sweet, musty odour of much used boxing paraphernalia.

I am sure that there are even those who derive pleasure from inflicting a beating on one of their fellows. From the performance of some boxers whose careers I have followed there may even be those who derive some strange satisfaction from being regularly beaten and ending each bout in a bloodied pulp on the mat.

None of those descriptions fits my own reaction to having to fight nor, I am sure, the majority of the other members of the class.

For all my lack of sporting prowess I was not exactly a tyro in the sport of boxing. I grew up in the surrounds of a sugar mill in coastal Queensland in a society which maintained a robust interest in the sport of boxing. Success at boxing brought a brief moment of fame and notoriety to some youths whose lives were otherwise marked only by the drudgery of unskilled or semi skilled labour. The local boxers trained and fought hard.

Each year at the Bundaberg Show, young hopefuls would pit themselves against the pugs in Jimmy Sharman's boxing troupe. Mr Sharman offered a pound or two for a round or two and the possibility of a job for those with promise. The larger than life displays on the front of his tent proudly proclaimed former members of the troupe who had gone on to become world champions. It was very seductive.

Even more seductive was Vanessa the Undresser, who promised to bathe before our very eyes just a few tents further down Sideshow Alley. For the modest entrance fee of 2/6d, prepubescent boys could discover that Miss Vanessa actually retreated behind an opaque

crinkled glass screen before divesting herself of the modest bikini which she had worn on the hustings and sprinkling herself with some water from a conveniently placed container.

Mr Sharman's boxers would not think of stooping to such deceptions, but having been conned out of 2/6d under false promises at Miss Vanessa's tent, we would then attempt to sneak under the flap of the Sharman tent, avoiding the rigorous scrutiny of a Chinese gentleman named Rudd Kee who maintained a stentorian watch on the entrance.

Once inside we watched enthralled as local blokes, more than a couple fortified with a few rums consumed at the nearby Canecutter's Bar, engaged with Mr Sharman's more canny boxers. Mr Sharman kept a close eye on his boys, but the bouts inside his immensely popular tent always promised action and entertainment. This had been my introduction to boxing.

My father also received regular tickets to the local boxing tournaments, which were held in an ancient timber framed theatre clad with corrugated iron with the grandiose title of the Austral Hall. Success at the bouts held within provided minor celebrity status to those young men who participated, in a town which took its contact sport fairly seriously.

In the days before television, Bundaberg's Austral Hall was venue for a variety of entertainments from vaudeville through pre-taping of syndicated radio shows (who remembers the Pied Piper?) to school balls. Few events attracted bigger crowds than the boxing. Local youths and always a strong contingent from the Cherbourg Aboriginal settlement provided the contestants.

A local boxing trainer who worked as a painter at the sugar mill offered to train myself and my brother in return for a favour he believed that he owed our Dad. With what I learned from him in the makeshift gym on the dirt floor underneath his rambling old Queensland house and what I gleaned at the fights, I had decided against pursuing an amateur career in the ring. But I had learned at least some of the rudiments of the sport and when I finally faced my moment of truth at Duntroon, I was in some ways more experienced, if not better prepared, than others. That in no way meant that I was a better fighter.

I seem to remember that the preliminary bouts for Thompson Cup were held in the gymnasium and the finals in ANZAC Hall. The college had a portable boxing ring which the PTI's would erect and disassemble during those times when they weren't actually harassing cadets. And I also seem to remember that in quiet moments they would engage each other in bouts of fisticuffs, for pain and suffering in the physical sense were not just things the PTIs just took in their stride, they were things that they actively sought.

Mr Waters and the PTI's would pore over the details of our individual weights, determining whether we were feather, bantam, light, welter, medium or heavy before deciding upon the draw for the preliminaries. The list of bouts was published and I was immediately seized by a deep depression.

The cadet I had drawn to fight not only was a member of my own platoon, he was one of those cadets with whom I had become close friends in the short time we had been at Duntroon. It was true that we both qualified for the same weight division, though at different ends of the criteria. There was however a significant difference in height between us, some six inches, and in the matter of reach, his arms were considerably longer than mine.

He was also a very competitive young chap, and we had a pre-fight meeting to discuss how we might approach the bout. I was, he assured me, his mate, but the Thompson Cup was a very prestigious event and he would not let our friendship interfere with his obligation to take the fight seriously. Thus there would be occasions, he cautioned, when he might actually

have to hit me, though I should understand that he would be motivated not by malice but by necessity. His assurances did nothing to lessen my anxiety.

I had one faint hope. Before coming to Duntroon, the young lad had never seen, let alone heard of a jock strap. He wore his with some reluctance and a considerable degree of trepidation. He did not trust the device which he described as a 'marble bag tied through your bum with dental floss.' He lived in fear the elasticised contraption would one day turn rogue, a slingshot from hell which would separate him from those very appendages which it had been designed to protect and which were of some importance to him.

Perhaps at some convenient moment before or during the fight I could play on his phobias and convince him that the moment he dreaded had arrived. Hopefully he would be sufficiently distracted for me to seize the moment and land a couple of telling punches. It was worth a try.

Staff and cadets turned out enthusiastically to watch the fights. Even the College was not sufficiently heartless to make individuals fight more than one bout in one session, thus the preliminaries were held over a number of days during which the lesser fighters were gradually eliminated. A slight diversion was provided by those Third Class cadets who had somehow avoided their obligation the year before and who were now required to undergo the indignity of being publicly walloped like some low, vulgar Fourth Class.

In those divisions where there were numerous cadets, a number of heats were required to select the two cadets who would contest the finals. Only two cadets met the heavy weight criteria and they were forced to go straight to the finals without the benefit of a preliminary bout. It would prove to be a battle of the Titans.

As I remember, attendance at all bouts by the cadets was compulsory, but most College staff attended voluntarily, taking a keen interest in the performance in the ring of individual cadets. No doubt how we behaved in the ring would be the subject of discussion at future boards of study. Lack of moral fibre could be the final consideration for a cadet whose performance was already falling short of the College's high standards.

Even the Padres took an unholy interest in the sport, enthusiastically and loudly offering advice in a decidedly unecclesiastical manner. For peaceful men of the cloth, they demonstrated a disturbing understanding of the finer points of boxing. Perhaps they were there to deliver Extreme Unction in the event that one or more cadets became boxing statistics, but they seemed not to let such considerations get in the way of their obvious enjoyment.

I do not have any clear recollection of any other fights before my own, so I do not recall whether any previous combatants had been carried bloodied from the ring. I recall that claret was occasionally spilled and that those cadets who actually bled, both bleeder and bleedee, enjoyed momentary celebrity status.

The Third Class who prepared us exhorted us to fight for the honour of ourselves, our platoons and our Companies.

As I was fighting a cadet from down the hall on middle floor A61, 5 Platoon Alamein Company would reap the honour no matter who won.

Finally, it was my turn. Our seconds prepared us in small room adjoining the gymnasium entrance where they shared with us their vast knowledge of the techniques of boxing gained from their own encounters but twelve months before, attempting to fill any gaps left in our training by Mr Waters and the other PTIs. The presence of the College doctor, who carried

out a last minute examination, did nothing to bolster our confidence for any number of reasons.

I have never walked from a death row cell to the gallows nor do I intend to, but the short walk from the dressing room to the ring must have had a similar feel. Someone who has not stepped in the ring to face the immediate prospect of a severe thrashing cannot truly understand the gut wrenching feeling that we all felt as we did so.

Bowels quickly turned to water as we surveyed the enthusiastic audience from across the vast expanse of the canvas mat with which some of us would soon enjoy cosy intimacy. The audience's prime reason for being there was to observe our imminent suffering and their enjoyment at our predicament was clearly obvious.

I have since been to many boxing tournaments, often in a Regimental setting. The modern custom is to have a scantily clad young lady assist with the proceedings, flouncing her wobbly bits around the ring announcing the bout and indicating how far the fight has progressed. No such luxuries applied to the RMC Thompson Cup in 1968.

Those of us actually boxing were dressed for the ordeal in our PT rig; white, spotless T shirts red-striped blue shorts plus sandshoes a brilliant white from the application of Kiwi liquid sandshoe cleaner, evenly applied with a red and white plastic and foam applicator. For some it would prove a wasted effort for such cleanliness only accentuated spilt blood. Officials wore the College's recreation dress of blazer, grey slacks, white shirt and tie and black shoes.

As we sat on stools in our opposing red and blue corners and our seconds whispered last minute instructions, the Second Class MC announced that Staff Cadet Eastgate in the blue corner and Staff Cadet Grubb in the red corner would now contest three one-and-a-half minute rounds. Our respective weights were given. Grubby gave me a reassuring wink to show that all would be well.

Our seconds cast us adrift and we met in the centre of the ring, where we shook gloved hands in the approved manner. Mr Waters refereed the bouts, and he admonished us to fight clean, fight hard and not to hit below the belt. With all the pre fight tension and distractions playing on my own heightened state of anxiety, I forgot to warn Grubby about his jock strap.

At last the Second Class cadet entrusted with the great responsibility of being time keeper struck the bell, and we joined combat.

We circled each other warily. For my part I was concentrating on ensuring that the leather which filled my immediate vision came from my own gloves rather than those of my opponent. I was concerned, with some justification, that Grubby's significant reach advantage would soon swing the fight his way. He made a couple of cautious jabs, which I blocked, but there was more circling than punching as we each sought to find the advantage.

Every time I thought I had uncovered a gap in his defence I would attempt to hit him, but he simply retaliated by punching me in the centre of the forehead so that my shorter arms were unable to reach the intended target. These effective blocks on his part had the added advantage that they were scoring hits while my ineffectual swings garnered no points at all.

As the bell signalled the end of each round, we returned to our respective corners where our seconds fanned us with a towel, rinsed our mouths with water and indicated how we might improve on our strategy in the coming rounds. Mr Waters checked our vital signs, no doubt to ensure that even if the lights were still on, there was also someone home.

As promised, Grubby did attempt to hit me fairly severely on a couple of occasions but if I had learned nothing else in my boxing career to date, I had learned the value of a solid defence.

I was determined not to be hit, or at least not to be hit hard.

When the bell signalled the end of round three we returned to our corners to await the judges' decision, for this bout would be decided on points.

I was drained of all emotion and physically exhausted.

I was thankful at least that I had not been battered senseless, and I had successfully resisted the overwhelming temptation to resort to Plan B and take a dive early in round one, as at least one of our fellow cadets had done.

Although I didn't fully realise it at the time, the Thompson Cup was an important ritual in our rites of passage as cadets.

In our miserable Fourth Class lives, there would be many obstacles placed in our path, but if we successfully negotiated each of them, we were on our way to being accepted fully into the cadet fraternity.

At that moment in my life it seemed like a very long road to hoe and I wasn't overly imbued with confidence. The Third Class seconds made all the right reassuring noises as we ourselves would do twelve months later with the next intake of cadets, but they did little to reassure me.

We returned to the centre of the ring for the result, and it was Grubby's hand which was rightfully raised in victory.

Perhaps I was a little disappointed. Perhaps I was a little relieved, for at least I wouldn't have to go through the ordeal again as he would now have to do.

Nevertheless I had lost, and in the twisted logic which passed as Fourth Class training, I knew I would have to account for the loss to the senior class cadets in my platoon later that night.

If I was disappointed at losing, then what happened next totally dispelled any such foolish notions. No less a personage than Mr Waters himself came to me as I stood in my corner, and I prepared myself for some inevitable criticism of my performance.

Putting his hand on my shoulder and looking me straight in the eye, he astounded me by saying for all to hear, and with more enthusiasm than I thought my performance deserved, "Good defence, Staff Cadet Eastgate, good defence! Well done!"

Since my performance at PT so far had only attracted the sharper side of his tongue, and although we would continue to have considerable rocky patches in our relationship, it was praise beyond value.

As I returned to the dressing room, it seemed that everyone was offering some form of encouragement or congratulations for my few brief moments in the ring.

For the first time since I had arrived at the College, I felt about ten feet tall.

Gradually and not without some reluctance, I was beginning to concede that perhaps Warrant Officer Basil Thomas Webster Waters, M.B.E. and the other PTIs weren't such bad blokes after all.

And a few days later when my mate Grubby again entered the ring, I was shouting advice and encouragement from ringside, secure in the knowledge that the valuable lessons which I had given him in defence would protect him from serious harm.

They didn't.

After two more victories he finally faced Joff Johnson, also from 5 Platoon Alamein Company and the ultimate champion, who doubled the number of Grubby's lips from two to four, thereby turning such simple tasks as eating and cleaning his teeth into considerable trials.

For a few days, wearing a jock strap was the least of his worries.