

Chapter 14

The Black Cap.

Mere mention of the words ‘*Black Cap*’ conjures up the most gruesome of scenarios - a packed Court of Justice dominated by a heavily bewigged judge with a face like a plate of porridge. Crouching behind his lofty bench, he stares down upon his court, a rectangle of black silk draped across the crown of his wig. In its day, this black silk possessed mesmeric properties out of all proportion to its size and, no matter what took place in that hushed Court, eyes that had drifted away momentarily to the accused, were drawn back to lock on to that black square - the Black Cap. Innards quaked at all it stood for.

However, I am writing about a different kind of black cap. Not at all gruesome, yet, as far as I was concerned, also possessed of mesmeric properties. It became a symbol of achievement and a driving force through my junior years in grammar school...

8.19am. 16th September 1937. The concertina doors of the Mumbles Train clacked back and a milling rabble of grammar school scholars was disgorged on to the Rutland Street terminus. Chattering, shoving and laughing, they stepped down boisterously from the train to cross the cobbled street and make their way to respective schools in the heart of bustling Swansea town.

An observer would have had little difficulty in picking out from this confident aggressive horde, those who were first year pupils. Stiff-satchelled and subdued in conduct, they tried hard to be inconspicuous but failed miserably; the pristine caps and virginal blazers stood out like beacons, pinpointing each and every one of them. And I was one of them.

The previous day had been my first day at Dynevor School. It had been a mid morning start and a day of settling in. This, the second day, was the first full day and school started at 8.50 am - as it would every day from then on. This meant an early rise at 7.00am in order to catch one of the Mumbles Trains that left Oystermouth around 8.00am.

So, heavy lidded and awash with apprehension, I wended my way through the echoing Swansea Market to my new school, eager to feed at the trough of higher education. I was weighed down with dread, a fear that the previous day’s activity had done little to lighten and which, throughout the rest of my Dynevor career, was never to disappear completely.

Passing through the Pell Street gate into the cauldron of the school yard was like stepping into a street riot in Bombay. The bulk of the pupils appeared to be racing around, screaming profanities and kicking a ball, a can, or each other; behaviour which, looking back upon now, I see as a moronic attempt to diminish the depleted self confidence of newcomers even more. Like a chameleon, I tried to merge into the surrounding brown stone walls and disappear but, along with my fellows, the newness of my uniform betrayed me. There was no running away, nowhere to go; the insults, the jostling, the head slapping, all had to be endured. Reared on those wonderful boys' weeklies, *The Magnet* and *The Gem*, all this came as a tremendous let down.

Deliverance arrived when whistles were blown and dead silence suddenly descended across the yard. Under the supervision of teachers, the boys lined up to make their way into the wax polished sanctuary of the school and on to pre-allocated form rooms. Here, satchels and caps were shed and placed on individual desks.

As if from nowhere, a mature looking, dark suited youth appeared at the classroom door. My eyes were immediately drawn to a gilt and enamel badge on his right lapel and, though he stood well back, I could see that it was of complex armorial design. He spoke softly but clearly and we listened, mouths agape, to this god-like figure,

‘Quiet, please! I am an Upper Sixth Former (*gasp!*) and for this morning only, I am escorting you to the School Hall and showing you where to sit. From tomorrow on, that will be the responsibility of your Form Captain. ALWAYS, you must make your way there quietly in orderly manner. AND YOU MUST NEVER BE LATE!’

We followed him along corridors and up several flights of stone stairways until we reached the open double doors of the Hall. He led us into its woody block vastness and shepherded us to the tiers of seats at the front. He pointed and simply said,

‘Sit!’ We sat.

Abruptly, he turned and went away. So, there we were, Form 2A, safely delivered to those seats allocated for that academic year. We were not the first to arrive, already corralled in front of the stage were thirty boys, each equipped with a musical instrument. Being sharp witted, I immediately deduced that this was the school orchestra. They were already at it, grinding out a tuneless dirge.

Meanwhile behind us, the Great Hall was filling as the more senior classes filed in. There was little noise, just the sound of shoes on hard block floor, the occasional drag of a chair and the murmur of escorting teachers and prefects.

Unexpectedly, from a door at the side of the platform, there emerged, in languid manner, an uneven procession of mature pupils in various stages of budding, hirsute manhood. Of all shapes and sizes, they were dressed formally but, unlike the rest of the school, with individual style. These, we were soon to discover, were the senior elite of the school, the *Sixth Formers*; members of the Upper and Lower 6th in Arts and Sciences. Entering the Hall last was one of their privileges; they sauntered past (and *how* they sauntered!) to take up their seats in the back tiers. As they passed, I looked up and saw that each one of them wore a badge similar to that worn by our escort. More god-like figures! I wondered, what was the significance of this badge?

We sat there waiting, whilst the orchestra, under dirge-master Gwilym Roberts, dirged on.

Waiting for what? We soon found out.

The orchestra finished playing (more or less simultaneously) and, in the ensuing silence, a line of gowned, mortar boarded gentlemen strolled on to the stage and sat down on a row of chairs facing the boys. Some I recognised from brief encounters of the previous day; they were the senior teachers from the various departments. Junior teaching staff was already seated with the boys in the space of the Hall.

Suddenly! Everybody stood up! Half asleep from the soporific effect of the music, the sudden movement of bodies, and dragged chairs, frightened the life out of me and from transcendental torpor I was rudely restored to planet Earth.

Striding on to the stage, a tall, gowned and boarded gentleman, with a striking resemblance to a secretary bird, made his way to the high backed chair at a table to the front of the stage. He bowed to his staff behind him. They bowed back. He turned to the Hall,

‘Good Morning, boys!’

Four hundred boys bellowed back,

‘Good Morning, Sir!’

Headmaster, Llewellyn John, Esq. BSc., A.R.C.S. had arrived. (As we discovered later - better known in the school as - ‘*The Beak*’).

‘Please be seated!’

Robot - like, everyone sat and the Morning Assembly Service started. We sang (or, rather - belted out) a hymn followed by a short Bible reading. This was delivered by a senior pupil and I noticed that he, too, wore a badge but of a different design to that worn by the sixth formers. Quite clearly, I could make out the shape of a red wing on top of a shield with a sub-scroll. What's this then? Answers were soon to come. Returning to the reading, I was astounded by the confidence radiating from this reader who spoke loudly and with great clarity. Yet another god-like figure.

A few announcements from the Head, another hymn, and our first morning assembly drew to a close. The whole school was back in classroom by 9.10 am, for the day's academic work to begin.

During the mid morning break, I compared notes with new friend Trevor Spinks. He, too, had noticed the badges. We sought answers. It was no good talking to the dervishes flailing around the yard so we made our way to the school doors where two lounging sixth formers were in close conversation. Although standing directly in front of them, we were completely ignored. Spinks coughed and spoke,

'Excuse me! Would you answer a question, please?'

They looked up in astonishment and one spoke,

'First years do not speak to sixth formers until spoken to. Understand!!!'

We both coloured and stammered our apologies. They relented and condescended to communicate. We were enlightened; the badges they wore were the insignia of the Sixth Former and were awarded when a pupil reached his fifth year and entered the Lower Sixth. We learned more.

In school, the badge was worn on the right lapel. *Out of* school, it was worn on a **plain black cap** (a dramatic, elitist change from the red and gold hooped caps of the junior school). One of the sixth formers unbent enough to produce from his brief case such a black cap with the magnificent badge in place. He placed it on his head.

This to me was indeed a crowning glory! The black cap was a symbol of school greatness and, with Pauline impact, became my goal of ultimate achievement. I swore,

'One day I was going to wear the Black Cap!'

This was a burning desire that never lessened in intensity throughout my school career in Dynevor. And, fulfilment came so tantalisingly close!

But what about that other badge, the one with the red wing? This, I discovered, was the supreme award - **the badge of a prefect**. Only eight prefects were appointed each year from the Upper 6th forms; they were top pupils chosen for outstanding qualities and granted many privileges, they were truly the elite of the elite.

I could never see me scaling the heights of that Olympus - I would gladly settle for the Black Cap.

I soon adjusted to the intensive academic life in this stratum of education. Periods of teaching were of fifty minutes duration, four in the morning with a 15 minute break. Two in the afternoon, no break. Finish at 10 minutes past 4. On top of this daily grind, there was homework every night, the load of which, progressively increased with the journey through the academic years. Within weeks I realised that academically, yes, I could cope easily and would benefit, but there was little else on offer. Most teachers entered the classroom, did their job with varying degrees of adequacy and walked out. There was little rapport, much head slapping and a dearth of inspired teaching to break the monotony.

Indeed, this was no Greyfriars School! With no games fields nearby, three times a term, a trip had to be made in a seedy, groaning, oil fumed 'bus up to the public Townhill pitches. Here, nightmare conditions reigned. Changing into kit took place in a wooden open shelter and clothes piled on to a grubby wooden bench. The pitches were sloping, badly drained and slippery with mud. With little enthusiasm we kicked a ball about and each other. One or two, totally disinterested teachers, surreptitiously drawing on their Craven A's, stayed out of the biting wind in the shelters. At 4 o'clock, everyone loped back to change in the hut. Needless to say, there were no showers or toilets and a call from nature meant a trip to the back of the hut, the painted surface of which, up to a level of three feet, looked like something rotting in the Amazon jungle (and smelled worse).

Then came the long grind down the hill back to Dynevor Place - cold, wet and filthy with mud. That is how we had to make our various ways home - me on the Mumbles Train. I hated games for ever more.

The Black Cap kept me going.

Christmas 1937. The term drew to a close with a change in routine on the last day. The School assembled as usual but the morning service was extended into a celebratory Christmas Carol Concert Service. This was one of the few school events which I thoroughly enjoyed. Lustily we sang the traditional carols

and finished with '*The Twelve Days of Christmas*'. Always, we sang this twice. Then, back to classrooms, picked up the blue and gilt Report Books and left early for the Christmas holidays.

My parents expressed their delight with the content of my report, relieved to discover that the school would allow me back for the Easter term. Unshared was my innermost aspiration - what would their reaction be if, one day, I came home wearing - 'the Black Cap'? They were good parents, I really wanted to do them proud. Mind you, already there was a degree of pride and, in my mother's case, a hint of boastfulness. One day when I was out shopping with her, we were accosted by Mrs. Hullin,

'Hullo, Mrs Maggs! How's Grafton getting on in his new school?'

'Wonderful, Mrs, Hullin! Learning an awful lot. Go on, Grafton! Say.

"Good Morning" to Mrs. Hullin in Algebra'.

1938. A turbulent year in Europe, but schoolwise a year of routine, with (apart from a polio scare) little of note happening. I held my own but it was with relief that July arrived, marking the end of the first academic year. With summer holidays before me, the return to school in September was too far off to worry about and, although not looking forward to it, at least I would be returning as a second year pupil, expecting school life to be less unpleasant. It was - but only fractionally.

1938 gave way to 1939. The era of political appeasement was drawing to a close. The summer holidays started with peace in Europe but by the time I returned to school as a third year pupil in September, my country was at war with Germany.

At first, apart from carrying gas masks and complying with blackout regulations, little changed. In school, war news dominated conversation and, not surprisingly, there was a great upsurge in interest in aircraft, both British and German, with pride of place going to the Spitfire. The 1939 Christmas Concert was much the same as the previous two and we all went home for a peaceful Christmas albeit with faces missing from around the festive table.

May 1940. It all changed. The *phony* war came to a dramatic end and, following the evacuation at Dunkirk, the Luftwaffe was suddenly on our doorstep. In June 1940, Swansea had its first direct encounter with the enemy in the shape of a lone fighter which flew over the Dock area. This built up to more frequent visits and to raids of increasing intensity, climaxing in February 1941 with the Three Day Intensive Blitzes on the town.

1941. An important academic year as far as I was concerned. In July I was scheduled to sit the CWB School Certificate Examination and, if I cleared this hurdle, I should return to school after the summer holidays to start a two year course of study for the Highers. This meant the big jump from the Lower School to the Upper and, in the process, becoming a 6th Former, *with the right to wear the Black Cap!* It was now very near and all those moments of wretchedness endured along the four year path to this goal, would be redeemed!

Until February 1941, in spite of frequent nocturnal air raids, little disruption to school daily routine had taken place. The good old Mumbles Train delivered regularly to Rutland Street and we attended a school that was completely unscathed, in spite of being in the heart of a town that was already scarred and bleeding.

19th, 20th, 21st February 1941 The annihilation of Swansea town. Three blitzes of terrifying content, concentrated on the heart of the town. This was intensity on a totally different scale and, looking back, it seems unbelievable now that, in spite of this tremendous hammering, the Swansea people, whose most harrowing experience to date had been the bloodshed and violence of a Swans v Cardiff football match, took it all and carried on stoically, making every effort to maintain their routine. Yet, the cumulative effect of that awful trinity of destruction was beginning to bring the town to its knees.

The morning after the 21st. The Train from Mumbles stopped at Brynmill - it could proceed no further into the burning town (looking back, it was a near miracle that it could get us to Brynmill!) We were told to walk up to Bryn Road where a shuttle service of SWT buses was in operation. By devious route, we were ferried to the Albert Hall where everyone got off and walked. It was a grey overcast day and immediate impressions were that the town of Swansea, from the Albert Hall to High Street Station was a vast desert of burning rubble; hoses were still playing on smoking buildings, and armies of soldiers, firemen, civilian workers were everywhere, working under the strange pall that hung over the town.

I *literally* crunched my way across the broken glass-littered roads to the Pell Street entrance of the school. I was not alone, crowds of people about me were trying to get to work. Duty called! They had to keep the wheels turning for our social structure to survive and within this routine, perhaps, help preserve their own sanity.

I walked into a thronged school yard. Pupils stood about and in their midst was a cluster of teachers, looking and pointing across to the burning top stories of the neighbouring Delabeche School (our female counterpart). The area swarmed with helmeted sappers, firemen and ARP personnel.

The top floors of both schools were gutted and the fine School Hall completely destroyed. Dynevor School and Delabeche were, indeed, *hors de combat* and, from where we stood on that fateful morning, it looked as though Dynevor School would never recover from such devastation. We went home.

And this was my School Certificate year! What on earth could be done to get out of this mess?

With Mumbles boys, Bernhard Hullin and Richard Davies, I walked to Brynmill to catch the Train home and, the story of that walk, with its many diversions, would fill a book! Let it suffice, to say here, that in less than the space of a year, the unbelievable had actually taken place! The Germans **had flown** to our ancient, well-worn but handsome town, deliberately pinpointed it, and had done their very best to blast it and burn it off the face of the earth. Total war had, indeed, come to the very heart of my hometown.

We reached Brynmill and, God bless the Mumbles Train, it took us home to the sanctuary of Mumbles.

Considering the universal chaos that prevailed, one can only marvel at the speed with which the civic authority re-acted. In spite of the immense damage done to the greater part of the educational establishment throughout Swansea, every pupil was back at academic work within two weeks!

The fifth forms (CWB School Certificate years) were re-housed in the Technical College on Mount Pleasant. We attended in shifts which alternated each week. These shifts were 8.00pm to noon and 12.30 pm to 5.30. With the wonderful co-operation of the teaching staffs the system worked. A few familiar faces disappeared from the Dynevor teaching staff, replaced by others from the almost equally stricken Grammar and Glanmor Schools .

Labs were non existent. But, for the remaining four months before we sat the exams, the teaching staff did all they could to carry us through. Their stout efforts bore fruit.

I was never to return to Dynevor School to become a Sixth Former. Those of us who stayed on to study for the Highers were absorbed into Bishop Gore's Grammar School. The Science boys were accommodated in Bishop Gore's, hastily patched up, old school on the hill and the Arts boys went across Mount Pleasant

to those buildings which once accommodated the Deaf and Dumb Institute. We ceased totally to be considered as Dynevor boys and came under control of Mr. Gray Morgan - a highly competent and fine Headmaster. Higher examinations came, and went, and my academic career went on hold following my call-up for military service. Those last few years in school were ones of confusion and great unrest, I was glad to leave and become a soldier, I felt it was the right thing to do.

The Black Cap with a host of other school traditions lie dead and buried in the ruins of Dynevor School. It came so very near!

Footnote.

Dynevor School did recover. Like a Phoenix it rose from the ashes and, within a year, all wreckage had been cleared from the top floors. Temporary, yet effective, weather proofing was carried out and the lower stories of both schools cannibalised to accommodate the one school of Dynevor. There was a price paid for this in that the fine old girls school of Delabeche ceased to exist; Miss Naylor's proud girls being moved to the Swansea High School.

Incredibly within a few years, though battered and bruised, Dynevor School was back in business! This was just one of the near miracles that occurred up and down the length of the country in wartime Britain- what we were capable of in those days!

My brother, Colin, became a scholarship pupil in 1942 and from the account of his six year career there, I came to realise that a dramatic change had taken place in Dynevor School. Teachers from other Schools reinforced a staff that had been depleted by the earlier recruitment for the Bishop Gore Grammar School. There were many new faces and Llewellyn John, although approaching retirement, showed remarkable leadership. In record time, he assessed his reinforced staff, dedicating, to each and every one, tasks they were best suited for. He fired their enthusiasm and built on their strengths; a far better relationship developed between staff and pupil. Unlike myself, my brother never experienced those days of dread and told me of his happiness in this born-again school.

Labs were rebuilt. Sadly, no Great Hall, but morning assembly was held in nearby Mount Pleasant Church. With Sixth Form facilities restored, Dynevor became virtually whole again, but, *with a difference*. Was the Blitz experience a catharsis? I do not know, but, a striking fact is that Dynevor School became a far happier seat of learning. Academically, too, it excelled and many were to leave that school, in the following years, to scale heights far greater than those achieved in the preceding years.

Perhaps the Black Cap was a symbol of those less happy days and it was to the good that, somewhere in the smoke and flames of those siren howling nights, it disappeared with the old school, never to be resurrected.

Possibly all this saved me from myself! Shamefully, how ready I was to assume, and perpetuate, all the insolence of office afforded by that Black Cap!