

Chapter 10

Egypt and the First Year

Abbassia was a very large, self-contained Army camp situated between Cairo and Heliopolis. At the time of which I am speaking, there was a cavalry regiment the 15th/19th Hussars, the Norfolk Regiment, a battery of the Royal Horse Artillery, a company of the Royal Tank Corps which included a section of Rolls Royce Armoured Cars, and, of course, the RASC, RAOC, RAPC, Signals and medical Corps.

The camp itself comprised a large area of barracks, Married Quarters, Churches of all Denominations, Cinema, Swimming Bath, NAAFI and Various Messes. In addition there were various playing fields, most of which were made of "mutte", a hard packed surface similar to a clay tennis court. There was also a pleasant playing field which was grassed called the Slade Ground which comprised two football pitches and a clubhouse, of which more later.

The school was on the lower floor of the Married Quarters, Block 'C' to which we had moved a few weeks after our arrival. My Mother went with us to report to school along with a boy and girl called Hartley. I mention this because they came from the Hartley jam manufacturing family. Their father, a sergeant, eventually inherited. It was a shame that the son was rather backward. Much to my disappointment, I was put in Standard Six which I thought a come down for me. As it turned out, it was a blessing in disguise as the syllabus was different. I was soon to pick up.

The headmaster was called Cleaver (nicknamed "Kiwi" - I don't know why). He was a Warrant Officer and a real gentleman. In some ways it was like looking at a reflection of my own father in as much as both maintained discipline by mental rather than physical coercion. Thus one learned self discipline when young, the best discipline of all.

The school was divided into two houses, Oxford and Cambridge and I was allocated to Cambridge where the head boy was named Start. Betty went into Oxford but always supported Cambridge because I was in it. The head boy in Oxford was named Hampton. I mention the names because they both figured in happenings that year which I have never forgotten. Ted Hampton was two years older than me and a very good cricketer. We used

to practice at playtime with wooden balls and he couldn't make head nor tail of my slow bowling with the changes of length and pace. Doug Start noticed this and when we played our first match, Oxford versus Cambridge, he put me on to bowl. I had Ted in tangles and the inevitable happened, he got impatient and I bowled him. I finished with eight for 15, hitting the wicket each time. I batted and got the highest score ever, 43. We won easily. I am sure that my Pop was pleased (I don't know when Dad became Pop). Ted was also a very good runner, particularly in the sprints, but in school sports day that year Doug Start beat him, something he had never done before. All in all, Ted had a rotten year in sports. Betty was highly delighted, the disloyal little hussy.

That year "Kiwi" decided to start us off playing hockey and we were provided with sticks and the necessary strip. Being a mixed school, the hockey was also mixed. It got off to a slow start but soon picked up and started me on many happy games over many years; I passed the love of the game to John, my elder son.

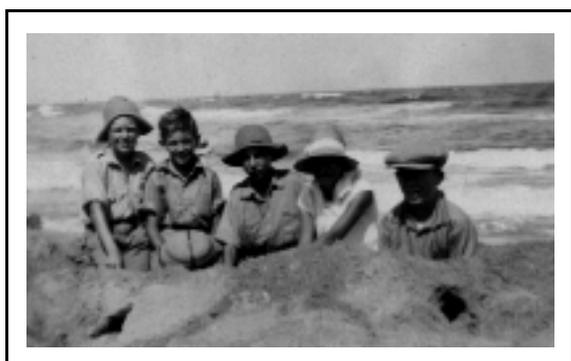
I have mentioned school sports. The school motto was "Play the Game" and it meant exactly what it said. Although the sports were competitive between the two houses, "Kiwi" ruled that, however good you were, you could only take part in two events in addition to one team game. This team game consisted of things like a boat race, where eight "rowers" and one coxswain sat astride a long pole and ran backwards with the cox doing his best to keep the rest straight.

"Kiwi" himself taught the top two classes; he taught well and, throughout, the emphasis was on character, comradeship and integrity. Oddly enough, his own son, although a nice lad, was a bit soft and could be said to be a bit of a mummy's boy. "Kiwi" only punished a boy once that year, and that only lightly, for sending a rude note to a girl. Respect for girls and women was insisted upon. The thought of sex had no part in my life at this time and no instruction was given. Lessons were interesting in that subjects were a little different from those to which I had before. The main one was map reading, a typical Army subject, which stood me in good stead in later years.

I have not mentioned football which we did play, some quite well, but there were no formal matches that first year. When we did play before school and playtime, we always played inter house. The result of this was that early in the morning, if someone turned up with a ball, we could find ourselves playing nine against two and before the rest

turned up, the score could be 20-0. One result of this was to make the boys punctual. As regards the Sports Day that year, I can vaguely remember winning a mouth organ. We could also win little prizes by running in the boys races at the Regimental Sports.

I learned to swim that year, mostly in self defence. We used to go to the swimming bath and I found myself being flung in by bigger boys (I still couldn't fight). In midsummer we went off, as families, to the seaside at Sidi Bish near Alexandria. It was there that my Dad taught me to swim. For some time I could only swim under water, but eventually found out how to keep on top. After that, I had no more trouble at the swimming bath.



The Beach at Sidi Bish

Towards the end of the first year I joined the Scouts and soon passed the Tenderfoot Badge. I am sorry to say that, to do this, I cheated. We were supposed to start a fire using only three matches but I must have used at least seven without admitting it and thus got my badge. The Scout and Cub Masters were Lance Corporals and first class at the job. The discipline was right and so was the spirit. After a few months however, they returned to England, but more of that later. I remember that I was in the Jackal Patrol. The troop at this time was run exactly as it should be.

I haven't said much about any activity other than school and sports chiefly because that was our life. We went to school between 9.00 am and 1.00 pm only, so life was carefree. Life at home was happy and my Mother didn't seem to mind whenever I trailed in a crowd of boys for a drink of water from the big "chattie" which was kept full of very cool water. Evenings I played cricket with my Dad on a nearby practice pitch. Occasionally we went to the cinema and the Sergeant's Mess. We had infrequent trips to Cairo where we crowded into trams filled with locals; we travelled Third Class. My Dad wasn't class conscious and he liked to mix with the natives, but I think my Mum would have been happier in the private First Class compartment.

More of our general impressions in another chapter but now a portrait of my Mother.