

Sleepless in Wilhelmshaven - Paul Levitt

Inspired by our newly published book and greatly assisted by a bout of insomnia that even caused me to pace up and down the corridors of Drake Boys occasionally during the early hours, I recently set out to try and find my old school reports that lay somewhere in our garage. I was looking for a large brown envelope, which^¾if the resident wildlife had not made their nests with it^¾should still be somewhere among the usual clutter and rubbish that displaced our car about 16 years ago. After several minutes of groping in the cold among the cobwebs, my search came to an end. The tattered and stained envelope was not a pretty sight, but protected by the reports from three previous and two subsequent schools (I've heard that five schools is not an unusually high tally among service families), the PRS report was quite well preserved. I opened it and read the letter dated 16th December 1960 from John Sharp, the headmaster ("der Kopf" to us), who expressed sorrow at the departure of my sister Judy and I from the school and confidence that we would both enjoy future success.

The highlights of my three terms at PRS were few and far between. I had once represented the school once at cross-country running, and appeared as the rather obscure Matthias in the theatre club's production of "Thou Bethlehem", which had proved beyond a shadow of doubt that I was not cut out for acting. I remember having just one or possibly two ultra-short lines and still managing to miss my cue. To me, the PRS Theatre Club had seemed the softest option when it came to the obligatory weekend activities. Not much change there then. But what about the report itself? Had my vague recollections of scholastic attainment become even more distorted by the mists of time?

The answer sprang out of the page in the form of a barrage of "C's" and even a "D+" for the spring term. Accompanying comments ranged from, ...must learn to concentrate, and...has encountered severe difficulties, to, ...much ground to make up, and Miss Tyler didn't mince her words when she wrote, ...spends a lot of his time talking about things that don't concern art. So, not exactly the auspicious start to PRS life for which my parents were hoping. And I could picture my father rueing his decision to spend the princely sum of 25 Pounds to send me to boarding school, especially when I, at the age of 11, was still eligible for the perfectly good day school in Herford.

Fortunately, things improved in the summer term and by the autumn term I was on a roll. Quote: ...spares himself no pains, ...is outstandingly careful, always interested, very keen worker, ...meticulous in all he does. My grades hit previously unknown territory. What could possibly be the reason for this amazing turnaround? I imagined my parents asking themselves the same question. This led me to think of why I should be proud to have attended the school. I believe the answer lies in the fact that PRS was a great environment for learning and improvement, as well as for practicing skills - especial social skills. And we continuously applied what we learnt to try and be as good as the many excellent benchmarks surrounding us. Naturally the teachers must have been good, too. The result was sense of achievement, which^¾together with the comradeship^¾explains why we were so happy at the school. Some might argue that time has erased any negative aspects from our minds, but did things like having to get up at the crack of dawn^¾to the sound of a gong at Drake Boys^¾really cause a problem? I was interested to read in our book that the rude awakening from the ship's bell caused two of Lawson's "inmates" to actually abscond from the school (nice story incidentally, Malcom). I can understand bullying being a possible reason for feeling negative about the school, but I can't recall seeing any, let alone experiencing any. I suppose this is what all bullies (and I gather from the book that there were a few) would also think, not having been on the receiving end.

When I left PRS at the end of 1960, forced by the retirement of my father from the Army, I experienced a big sense of regret. Coincidentally, an unexpected link with PRS came to light at my next school, whose head had been taught by John Sharp at gunnery school. This experience had left him with a very favourable impression and mentioning it helped to make me feel more at home at my new school. Alas, my father didn't settle in his new civilian job and after just a year we moved once more. Despite the head of my next school being a former fighter pilot at the Battle of Britain and for which he won the DFC, he was not winning his latest battle and the school could be broadly described as a dump. Nonetheless, the standards set at my previous school and PRS

helped me to become Head Boy in just my second year there (1963/64). I was glad to leave. Turning to our book, I happily recognize one or two names of contemporaries who contributed, but I do admit to being surprised not to see more of their names. And I am sure this is not because they didn't enjoy their best school days at PRS. Incidentally, well done that Air Chief Marshal chappie. To my mind there must have been hundreds of other potential high flyers at PRS whose stories haven't yet been told. But achievements at school are one thing and achievements in life are another. For my own particular story you'll have to wait until my next bout of insomnia.

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