

# TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

## Number ten

### Intimations of Salvation

Last night while looking through another pile of old notes I came across a file full of jottings I made some 50 to 60 years ago during my National Service and subsequent years in the Territorial Army. I started skating through them, as you do, and marked a couple with more than a passing connection with TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL. Something for the future. I thought.

Then before I closed the folder I cast an eye down my oldest dated note - August 1957. It was a record of a 'yarn', a 'story', a 'tale', told to me by a long-gone great friend and magnificent soldier, whom I had served with in the 1st battalion of The North Staffordshire (The Prince of Wales's) Regiment during my National Service and subsequently met again in my Territorial Army service. As I read on I realised his story had an uncanny resonance with what we are experiencing today in the UK. It read like a metaphor for our times, a timely message to us from them....from right back in early 1944, when my brother officer, Harry, was a sergeant in the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion of the 'North' at the time of the infamous Anzio landings in Italy and subsequent bloodbath to gain a foothold behind the German frontline at Monte Cassino.

It is not a funny tale; it is not light-hearted. But like so many tales told by soldiers it has its humour. It is fascinating how soldiers can see a comic side in the direst of situations. But I am not going to dwell on details of the awfulness of what transpired and the tragedy and futility of war that Anzio along with so many other battles exemplifies.

The main reason I feel impelled to share Harry's story with you is the light it throws on real leadership as opposed to the make-believe sort.

Harry explained to me that after the initial landings and the struggle to gain a foothold beyond the port of Anzio, the battalion was held up outside a ruined town of Buonriposa. Harry was the Platoon Sergeant, the second-in-command of a group of some forty men, led by a young lieutenant, who very soon became a casualty, leaving Harry to lead the platoon. The twenty or so soldiers who were now left out of the initial forty were crouching in the bed of a tiny stream, one of many that criss-crossed the plain. Bullets pinged all around them; they did not dare raise their heads above the parapet. His wireless operator a couple of yards from him could hear no messages on the frequency he had been given. 'But I can get an Eyetie bloke singing about a girl called Rosa,' he added. 'Not bad either....'

Harry's orders were that his platoon and the rest of the company of a nominal 120 men were to attack a German machine gun in the middle of the German line some 50 yards in front of them, behind a railway embankment they could make out even through all the smoke and mayhem. The start-time for the attack was in ten minutes time.

'It's utter madness,' he thought. They had neither the manpower nor apparently the artillery support they had been promised for the past two days. He decided he had a duty to make this plain 'higher up'. So he crawled down a ditch to get closer to his company commander, a major, and held a shouted conversation.

'I understand your concerns, sergeant,' shouted the major. 'But orders are orders and we have been promised artillery support. The general has told the colonel who has told the company commanders.... that he is fully aware that massive artillery support is the key to breaking through.'

'I know that,' replied Harry with growing frustration.....'but where is it?'

'That is not for you to worry about,' said the company commander. 'That is the job of the General Staff. The General assures me he is doing all he can to arrange for two full Field Artillery regiments to be in support at the earliest opportunity. That is a massive increase in fire power. The general says he is sure it will turn the tide. You never know, sergeant, it may be in place now....or perhaps a bit later. Just get back and prepare to lead your thirty men to take that German post in front of you....'

'Sir, begging your pardon. I don't have thirty today. That was yesterday. 'There are only twenty of us left.'

'Oh....well, just lead twenty, then. Get on with it!'

So they did.

And three hours later the platoon lay in another ditch just ten yards in front of their previous one....exhausted and battered....and by now just ten of them, and three of those, including Harry had wounds. By some good fortune his wireless operator was still by his side. Both were panting hard and stemming blood from each other's wounds.

'Can you raise anything on that thing?' Harry asked his Wop.

'Still no luck, Sarge. But the Eyetie bloke is now a woman....or it's a bloke with very tight trousers singing very high notes.'

Harry patted him on the back. 'Great stuff, Wood. You're a b...inspiration.....even if you are no good as a wireless op!'

'I can't help having manky equipment, Sarge,' said the hapless Wood. 'I can shout further than this effing machine will transmit!'

The company commander eventually made his way down various ditches and culverts to find out what was happening to Harry's platoon and issue further orders.

The last thing we wanted, Harry told me twelve years later in the officers mess in Minden, where we were part of the British Army of the Rhine, was any more orders. We were just intent on survival. That would be a victory as far as we were concerned. But, at last, someone was about to talk honestly and openly, and that would buck us all up.

The major got to a few yards behind Harry. 'Sergeant, some good news.'

'Oh no, sir! Not more of the bullshit. We haven't been trained for it! ....Just give the orders, sir!' Harry could not contain his anger.

'No, Sergeant. It really is good. It seems that the General has seen the light. He is at last levelling with us. The artillery he has promised....and which he keeps saying is the key to our breaking through...has arrived in the port and will be in place during tonight. Guaranteed! Not wishful thinking. Even better, a Guards battalion will also relieve us during the night.... I repeat, these are not hopes and expectations. These will happen. But if we are to withdraw in an orderly fashion you will have to hold this ditch for the next five hours.....'

Silence.

'Do you understand what I am saying, sergeant? You and your ten men are the only group between here and the only route left to take the battalion back through.... If we are to save the majority. Do you understand?'

'You are asking us to stay here and fight to the last man, sir....is that it?'

'I'm afraid I am not asking you, sergeant ....I am ordering you to. It doesn't make much difference, but at least the men will know it's not your decision....But I will make sure that the six mortars that the battalion has left will spend the next five hours pounding the German line in front of you before the battalion withdraws. Just keep any stray enemy away until then, and then.....well, then get out.'

'Oh, is that all, sir....I thought you might ask for something really difficult....it's a piece of cake...!'

The company commander smiled though Harry could not see it. 'Sarge, I have a sneaking feeling that you and I will be meeting again. Good luck!' With that he was gone.

Harry then told me he knew exactly what he could do with ten men and the might of the German army facing them.... who they could actually see scurrying back and forth preparing to make a counter-attack.

'My favourite book at school was 'Beau Geste', he told me. 'I had a battered copy in my belongings back on the ship in the bay. Great adventure stuff. I really loved the scene where Beau, who was in the French Foreign Legion, finds himself defending a fort in the desert - alone with a load of dead men on the parapet. He kneels each body against a firing hole, shoves a rifle through the hole and runs up and down firing each rifle in turn, giving the impression that the fort was defended by a hundred men. Just the inspiration I needed. I got my ten men to line up all the rifles they could gather - and there were plenty of them lying around - We got about twenty five in place plus two Bren guns in the centre. Our mortars started bombarding the Germans, and they started shelling us. When they left their cover we darted from gun to gun and eventually stopped them in their tracks. We did this for over four hours....and do you know what?....we never thought for a moment that we would be over-run. We just felt on top of things....we were in charge...confident in ourselves....believing in what had been promised....sure of the support. When the artillery barrage began in the dark we sort of knew it would...so we left.... all ten of us. Not a single one had either been killed or wounded for five hours.

I have never felt on such a high.... My ten great men would follow me anywhere after that...they thought I was a veteran.... who knew it all. It was actually my first taste of active service. I never told my soldiers that. But neither then nor ever after did I treat them as cannon-fodder. I always made sure they knew the score...the reality....no mist and mirrors for me or them.'

And then at the bottom of my page of notes from the past that I had found in a folder in my file last night I read a final little scribbled entry: *Harry says, 'if you consider yourself a leader never pull the wool over the eyes over those who rely on you.....or one day they will pull a blanket over your head.'*

It was, perhaps, not very sophisticated management advice..... but, my goodness, it isn't half relevant to the present emergency we are facing.

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