

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number Six

I am delighted that an old pal has taken up the challenge o 'do something a bit different' and has done some illustrations for my Tales. His first two missed the publishing of the tales on-line last week, so I will find a way of incorporating them later. We begin Week Two with his third illustration. You will see exactly what it is illustrating when you read the story.

My Role in the Cold War



Since I have now got into a flow about what Headteachers actually do it is time to tell you about the strangest role I ever had to discharge.

I did not know when I accepted a headship post in a rural school in the 1970s, and nor did many other heads, that one of our Cold War roles was to be a 'War Duties Officer'. It was all part of the national civil defence plan that has now given way to general emergency planning, largely to deal with terrorist activity and natural disasters. But at that time many schools were earmarked as emergency

sanctuaries in the event of a nuclear attack from the east – the USSR i.e. Russia, or even China.... Anyway, some diabolical threat from the east.

I suppose the thinking was that schools could organise reception of refugees, stash away hundreds of beds and bedclothes, and look after emergency rations to feed the population (those that remained alive). It was largely a fallacy. Few schools did have such a capacity.... but it well illustrated the same 'can do', and 'go to it' spirit that got us through the two world wars in the twentieth century..... and is being called for in this latest pandemic.

None of this had I appreciated, or even given a moment's thought to, during my teaching career up to then....not, indeed, until a letter fell onto my desk within a few weeks of taking up my post as the first head of this new school. It came in the usual morning pile of letters ex

I still have the original letter in my file, but I edited it for an after-dinner entertainment at a Secondary Heads Association dinner some time later. Here is the letter and my (and my Chairman's) reply to the letter received way back in the 1970s.... a wholly different era from now.... with a wholly different challenge..... but you had to laugh or you would have despaired!

To: The War Duties Officer

Routine Test of Carrier Line 076/139

Dear Sir,

The following should be borne in mind by all Receiver Point Operators.

- 1. Test your receiver once per week. If you find a fault try banging the handset; it usually does the trick. If it does not, inform your superior War Duties Officer.*
- 2. Remember to switch the battery off after use, because you may find it difficult to obtain new batteries in the event of a nuclear emergency. In our experience British Telecom are usually out of stock. However, bear in mind that some local stores or cycle shops may stock similar ones.*
- 3. Remember that a nuclear device may have gone off – which will cause you some extra problems. It may be necessary to shout into the mouthpiece to avoid distortion. You will know when to shout if the sender is not able to hear you*
- 4. Read carefully your 'instruction card' before hostilities commence.*
- 5. Remember that if an attack is imminent it is advisable to climb into the large brown paper bag which has been provided in your War Duties pack, remembering to take your receiver with you.*

(Now, you may think I made this up! I did not. It really was Civil Defence advice that brown paper gave protection against radio-active radiation – if you survived the blast. I still possess a copy of the ministry's advice. It does not say where you can get large brown paper bags from once you have used the one provided, but in the 1970s bags of sugar were packed in large brown paper sacks as were loose potatoes and for a long time we had one neatly folded brown paper bag in a desk drawer at home! I kid you not! Oh, and we never did find the one that was supposed to be in the 'pack provided'. Come to think of it... we didn't find the 'pack' either.)

- 6. When returning the Test card please remember to put a stamp on the envelope. Otherwise The General Post Office has assured us that it will be returned to sender.*

After discussing the instruction with my chair of governors I could not resist sending the following reply.

Dear Sir,

Re your Routine Test letter.

Your instructions were both interesting and enlightening, but ultimately left a lot to be desired.

Here on the front line in rural England the situation is not as simple as you make out.

- 1. We do not have a carrier line, nor receiver;*
- 2. There is no War Duties Officer, or if there is, he/she is well camouflaged;*
- 3. We do not possess any brown paper bags. (Our green-grocer tells me there is currently a dire national shortage of brown paper sacks and flatly refuses to co-operate.)*

However, the good news is that the town post mistress has promised to get on her bike to deliver any messages you send in an emergency. And I have also ascertained that the local constable will gladly offer help – provided he is on duty that day.

We hope that meets the requirements and your approval.

*Yours sincerely,
(signed)*

PS. Presumably the enemy will give us rural denizens some extra warning time in the light of our communication difficulties. Otherwise it would not be fair.

Not surprisingly I heard no more. But it obviously worked as the town was never attacked.
