

MILITARY TATTOO 1983

By John Doe

I have received a few e-mails commenting on my last article, “Newcastle Moments.” Most of the comments were complimentary. However, one reader did find my articles “frivolous” and wanted to know whether, after more than 31 years in the military, there weren’t any serious moments that could be written about?

The truth is, ~~that~~ there were far more serious moments than frivolous ones. I am sure articles recalling those serious moments would make for interesting reading, but unfortunately such writing requires serious thought, and that would be too much like hard work for me!

~~W~~riting is one of my hobbies. A hobby is to be enjoyed, and if in the process others are able to share in the enjoyment, then what an accomplishment! When that is no longer possible, writing will be treated as a job that requires payment. I hope my memory holds out to make this hobby a long-lasting one.

However, as the years tick on, I have my doubts, and I recently have come to fully accept the saying, ~~that~~ “life sometimes imitates art.” You see, the only acting part ~~in any stage production that I’ve~~ ever ~~have~~ had was at the age of seven-seven or eight. It was in a play in which I played ~~acted~~ the part of a forgetful grandfather, who was even incapable of remembering that his misplaced spectacles were as on his own head! That experience, as well as some other artful ones, taught me some long-lasting lessons.

Tyrant Icilda

I cannot now recall how it is that I got that part or, for that matter, how my dear mother got me on stage ~~the that night night of the performance~~ at the Falmouth Courthouse, in front of a capacity crowd. I certainly recall how Icilda, the young girl who sat directly in front of me in my class at the Falmouth government primary school (“Barrack School”), got the leading part in the play.

Icilda never stopped talking, knew the answer to every question, and her classmates lived in fear of her fiery tongue! It was impossible, during classes, for any other child present in the class to place his or her hand in the air, to volunteer the answer to a question being poised by the teacher. Icilda would immediately rebuke any

such upstarts with, “A whaunu a put up unu hand fa?!” ~~she would scolding us with a~~, followed by a loud hissing of her teeth and then her *piece de resistance* exclamation, “Ccho, unu see, unu!”

She also had her own remarkable way of putting her hand in the air to of-volunteering the answer of to-a question. As the question was asked, she would spring up out of her seat like a jack-in-a-box, shouting, “Me, Miss!, Mme, Miss!” ~~at the same time~~ with her hand pointing straight in the air and fingers flashing in a whipping like motion. Needless to say, ~~that~~ it was never necessary for me to raise my hand to volunteer answers to questions, so -asked and I only did so when I needed permission to leave the classroom to go to use -the bathroom. Day in and day out, the members of the class hoped and probably even prayed that Icilda would have an affliction of lockjaw!

The night of the play, in which Icilda’s part called for her to declare, “Look! There is Grandpa’s glasses on top of his head!” while at the same time pointing to my head. The remainder of the cast would then break into ~~song as~~ the finale song, “Old Grandpa, poor Grandpa has found his glasses...” The music for this was being provided by our teacher on her out-of-tune piano.

Icilda was in good form during the play, actually jostling (more like pushing) other actors into correct positions and providing infuriating and menacing gestures (not called for in the script) to those who slipped up on their lines. At last it was Icilda’s turn for her major speaking part. She opened her mouth, ~~and~~ at the same time pointing to me. No sound, however, came from her mouth. After she had made two or three more attempts, our teacher, sensing that Icilda had forgotten her lines, whispered the lines in a tone loud enough only for those on stage to hear, ~~repeated her lines~~. Icilda, apparently ~~had~~ only hearing the word, “Look!”, picked up the cue and like a stuck gramophonea broken -record, she spit out, d, kept on saying, “Look! Look! Look...”

With the audience now sensing that something was not right, our teacher intervened with her musical cue. The chorus started and when completed, Icilda was still pointing and muttering those life-saving words, “Look! Look! Look...”

I lost touch with Icilda after those Barrack School days. ~~I'm sure she p~~Probably ~~she~~ went on to become a famous lawyer somewhere, jumping to her feet to object to any and everything!

Odd appointment

My next involvement with anything to do with a stage production was not in an acting role, but as the production director of 1983 Military Tattoo staged on the Polo Field ~~at~~, Up Park Camp. How or why this job was given to me is still a mystery to me. I can only surmise ~~;~~ that it had to do with my availability!

Armies ~~also-often~~ tend to assign duties ~~illogically~~, such as officer in charge of swimming to ~~a their~~ non-swimmers and gardens member to a person who would not know what or how to care for plants. ~~!~~ So it must have been that my secret became known to my seniors, that apart from my sole acting part at age seven or eight, I had not the slightest connection with the theatre, or for that matter, been involved in any such production.

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I was expected to play the part my teacher did some ~~thirty~~30-odd years before at the Falmouth ~~courthouse~~Courthouse. However, instead of an out-of-tune piano, I was to have four military bands, including one from the U.K., and a cast of ~~more than~~over 800, ~~to~~ including school children. ~~Other play Some items-~~features ~~ed~~ were dogs, ~~others~~, horses, motorbikes ~~and~~, several vehicles (~~to~~ including a fire engine, helicopters and parachutists). The backdrop for the arena stretched for ~~more than 450~~ over four hundred and fifty feet, depicting the fictitious “Fort Xyamaica” (the artistic concept of the brilliant, late Eric Coverley). There were so many stage props that it was necessary to have as many as ~~over fifty~~50 stage handlers commanded by an officer.

Instead of a courthouse room with an audience of ~~50~~fifty or so adoring parents, my audience was to be ~~for~~ 10,000 ~~pers~~plens for ~~the~~ each of ~~the~~ four performances.

I was aware that ~~themy~~ audience had longed for this type of military display – the last Tattoo being ~~produced~~held in Jamaica some 17 years before. Had their Defence Force improved since independence? Could we live up to the positive perceptions held by the Jamaican public regarding their military? I ~~kn~~ew that all the

positives could so easily be erased if our performances did not live up to their high expectations. Happily, the experienced cChairman of the committee I reported to, as well as its members, ~~and the members also,~~ were aware of the requirement to have a professional performance.

Fortunately, too, my more than~~ever~~ 300--strong supporting staff were dedicated and hard working. I was particularly fortunate to have a sincere, honest and hard-working secretary/administrative officer. The planning and preparation for the Tattoo production commenced in earnest toward the end of 1981. There were to be several months of rehearsals. Rehearsals would last well into the night, and there were occasions when some performers would fall asleep while waiting behind stage for their turn.

On one particular night, one of the horses involved in a particular scene item, bolted without its rider and was caught trying to leave Up Park Camp – apparently the animal horse had had its fill of waiting around and took off in disgust! On yet another occasion, a police Alsatian dog slipped away from his handler and was luckily stopped by the sentries at Cotton Tree Ggate, also trying to leave Up Park Camp. Of course, when it was the dog's turn to come on stage to capture a “criminal,” the handler alone ran on stage with the dog's lead and no dog. Although he was a careless handler, he nevertheless possessed a good sense of humour. A—as he ran on stage, he provided the barking sounds, very much in the manner that was ~~ee~~ expected of his escaped charge!

House ablaze

~~But m~~My fondest recollection of the Tattoo, also occurred during one of those late--night rehearsals. There was ana part in item ~~of~~ the show that called for a fire truck to extinguish a building on fire on stage. The fire engine would race on to the arena with sirens blaring, bells ringing, and lights flashing. That particular night, in keeping with the script, the house fire was started. Instructions were then given by radio to the backstage to send on the fire truck. Nothing happened and, in fact, there was no acknowledgement of my order. I tried repeatedly, but without success.

At the time, I was ~~located at the time~~ in the control booth on the opposite side of the arena to the backdrop. Merrick Needham, who voluntarily agreed to be our narrator for the Tattoo, ~~and probably the most meticulous person I have ever met – he carefully produced production sheets for every performance/act which detailed the exact timings, actions, commentary and music for literally every second of the show~~ – kept on ad-libbing with hints in the commentary for the fire truck to get on stage. I was furious and stomped up and down in the booth cursing the radio and the fire truck operators! But alas, just when the house was almost flattened by the fire, I heard the siren and saw the flashing lights of the fire engine. But the fire engine did not enter the arena. Instead, ~~at great speed~~ it headed at great speed away from the arena in the direction of Cotton Tree Gate.

~~Merrick~~ Needham and I looked at each other in utter amazement. What on earth was happening?, I ~~thought~~ wondered! Just then the telephone in the booth rang. It was the York Park Fire Station asking for the address of my home. I was told that a fire engine was on its way to my home, but was not sure of the exact address or how to get there. This was alarming news ~~for~~ me. I immediately sought the quickest way of getting to my home before it too was burnt to the ground as the stage house had done earlier.

Paul Doyle of Audiofon, who was on duty at the rehearsals, saw my distress and volunteered to drive me to my home in his brand new Mercedes Benz. My home was approximately 20 minutes ~~by road~~ from Up Park Camp at that time of the night. But on tThat night, it took us no more than 10 minutes to get there. We arrived to find my house very much in-tact ~~and with~~ my family unaware of the alarm.

My subsequent investigations ~~of this event~~ revealed that a soldier in the control booth at the time of the loss of radio communications had heard me angrily stating that the house was going to be burnt to the ground unless the fire engine responded quickly. Using his initiative, he ran across the field to the backstage and raised the alarm, saying, thus: “Major Douglas says that the house is burning down and the fire engine must rush on now!” By the time the message had got to the fire engine personnel, it had changed from “the house” to “his house” and “rush on now” had

changed to “rush there now.”—~~“Major Douglas says that his house is burning down and the fire engine is to rush there now”.~~

We all learned, after that incident, just how easily battles are sometimes lost. But my greatest lesson from the Tattoo, and one that I have repeatedly shared with others, had to do with a lesson taught to me by the chairman of the Tattoo committee.

Return to basics

The Tattoo, with the exception of one performance, was to be held under lights. Light towers were therefore constructed and flood and spotlights imported for use. The soldiers who were assigned to operate them were very inexperienced operators. No matter how we tried, if there was anything that was certain to go wrong during the rehearsals, it would be our lighting – wrong coloured lights would come on and spot-lights would focus in the wrong areas. The detailed production sheets and wireless intercom did not help.

In desperation and utter frustration, I went to see the chairman. He listened attentively to all my efforts to get the lighting right and then declared, “Allan, you need to get back to basics.” Puzzled by his remark, I asked what he meant. He answered with a question, “What were you taught about battle procedure?” Not understanding yet the relevance of his question, I gave him the standard exam answer to the question. Then he asked a rhetorical question: “Don’t we make a model to assist with the issue of orders. Go and make a model of the arena and practise your light operators with the use of the model.”

I rushed away from his office and set about having the tabletop model of the arena constructed from cardboard. Tiny lights similar to those used to decorate Christmas trees were used to simulate the many stage lights, and ordinary flashlights were purchased and used to simulate the flood lights and spotlights.

With the lighting operators holding with their flashlights and me with production sheets in hand, my office would be darkened and they would stand over the cardboard model and respond to cues from the

production sheets. After those sessions, they never got the lighting wrong at subsequent rehearsals or at ~~and for~~ the major performances that followed.

That lesson remained with me for my entire military career.
Never forget the basics!