

OK, I'LL FIGHT THE GUY WITH THE LISP THEN

“Fancy a run ashore then”? Enquired Miles’y politely, as I re-appeared from the direction of the shower having just finished my training. “OK then you’re on” I replied. As I busied myself at my nearby locker we were joined by another couple of oppos, Paddy and Taff as usual. “How much dosh have we got then” ? Paddy asked. The three emptied the contents of their pockets onto the nearby messdeck table. The next few minutes were occupied by the feverish counting of bits of silver and copper coins. “How much in the kitty then lads”? I asked without turning around and trying hard not to laugh. This scenario must have been repeated a million times by members of the armed forces throughout the world since time immemorial. “I reckon we can muster about 4 quid between us, how about you then JR”? Asked Miles’y. Fishing into my locker and my wallet I pulled out a 5 pound note which I tossed onto the table. “Bloody Hell, you’re flush” Chorused three voices. “We’re laughing then” Said Miles’y gleefully, “That’s enough for a run ashore and maybe fish and chips on the way back” Replied Taff and Paddy in unison.

The year was 1955 and I had been in the Royal Navy for 2 years. Having survived Initial Part 1 Training and having opted out of Ordnance School I had pretty much been a bit of a ‘Skate’ and ‘General Dutyman’ ever since, mainly passing my time as a Senior Rate’s Messman. The Royal Navy however, had other ideas and together with another bunch of my fellow ‘misfits’ we found ourselves after a spell at Lee-on-Solent, down at Fort Rowner or HMS Siskin the home of the Fleet Air Arm’s Fire Fighting School. Ever since my first training days I had been lucky enough to enjoy those little extra privileges which a keen sporting interest in the Royal Navy allows. Football was my first love and latterly Boxing had rekindled my enthusiasm in a boyhood interest particularly when representing the Service or my Establishment. I really enjoyed the strict training regime which both these sports demanded and I became remarkably fit by training with none other than British Olympic runner and champion half miler, Lt John Wrighton RN. During my time in the Ordnance School at RNAS St Merryn, Cornwall I won the Light Welterweight, Inter Service Boxing Championship by defeating a rather reluctant RAF opponent who for some reason wished he were somewhere else. It seemed that my very unorthodox ‘southpaw’ style and precise weight of exactly 10 stones presented problems in getting suitable opponents and this put my Boxing somewhat ‘on the back burner’ so to speak. I did however; continue to represent my establishment at Football and continue to train hard. Life, therefore was pretty good to me.

All dressed in our best No 1 uniforms and smart as paint we handed in our Station Cards at the Regulating Office and out of the main gate towards the Gosport Ferry. Our immediate plan of action was to go to Southsea as usual, a couple of pints of ‘scrumpy’ in the Claremont Pier then off to the Festival Bar and Clarendon in Southsea for another few pints and see what the evening brings. We were all in a happy mood as we landed from the Ferry outside The Harbour Railway Station and as it was a nice evening decided to walk the odd mile to Southsea. As we neared the Common we noticed there was a Fairground in full swing with hundreds of people all milling around. “Come on, let’s go and have a shufti” Bawled Miles’y as we all eagerly joined the throngs of people. Making our way through the rows of amusements and side shows we joined a large crowd outside a Boxing Booth. Up on the stage were half a dozen Boxers of various weights standing with their arms folded and clad in dressing gowns. There was an old fat man dressed in tweeds and a bowler hat bellowing through a megaphone “Anyone here would can go 3 rounds with any of my boys up there, can earn a fiver” He waved his arm indicating the Boxers up on the stage. All of

them bore obvious trademark signs of their pugilistic occupation. My eyes travelled over all of them in turn in a rather matter of fact way and my three companions noticed this. Miles'y nudged me. "JR, I reckon you could duff that old guy up on the end there" He whispered. The man on the end of the row of Boxers to whom he was referring must have been at least 40 if he was a day and was almost bald. Paddy and Taff had already anticipated "That's an easy fiver JR, don't you reckon"? They both whispered. As if by telepathy people in the crowd began to offer their encouragement in an attempt to get me to take up the challenge. The fat man with the megaphone then bellowed "Come on Jack, show us what you're made of" as he waved a five pound note in my direction. I felt a bit uneasy to say the least, after all these guys were professionals who had probably boxed hundreds of rounds between them whereas I had only ever boxed in three round amateur bouts. The crowd were adamant as were my three companions. "Come on JR, you can do it" Hissed Miles'y. "Come on JR" yelled the crowd as they began to push me forward towards the stage. The fat man with the megaphone waved his arm in the direction of the Boxers above me. "Anyone you like Jack" He laughed. "Only three, three minute rounds and the fiver's yours" He added.

Realising that there was no way that I could possibly back out now and fancying myself just a little bit perhaps, I measured up the old guy at the end of the row of Boxers. I glanced over them. There were at least three Heavyweights and a couple of obvious Middleweights which put them between 2 and 4 stones above my weight. Having trained with similar fellows I knew just how hard these guys were capable of hitting. Pointing at the smaller Boxer on the end of the row I asked him "How much do you weigh mate"? I enquired politely. The balding Boxer turned to me and answered with an obvious lisp "My lateth weight ith ten thtone theven. My three companions, as did the crowd almost doubled up at the poor chap's impediment. I decided after a moments thought that I would still be giving away almost half a stone but what the hell. "OK I'll take the smaller chap on then" I announced to the fat man with the megaphone. "You mean the one with the lithp" Some wag in the crowd chortled followed by hoots of laughter. "Right Jack, come on up" Said the fat man.

Together with my three companions I was ushered up the steps and through a curtain into a small tented area where the boxing ring had been erected. We were shown through into another tented area which served as a dressing room' it had a wash basin and a toilet The fat man with the megaphone joined us. He pointed to a large box on a bench. "You will find some gear in there which should fit you and I will be back in around ten minutes. I never normally suffered from nerves but on this occasion I felt very uneasy for some reason. Eventually I found shorts, boots and a grubby dressing gown which fitted reasonably well but the huge gloves looked as though they had seen better days. My three companions kept up a barrage of encouragement as I got changed. "Look after my gear" I instructed Miles'y as the fat man returned to say "Come on Jack, you're on" Taking me by the hand he led me through into the main tent where the clouds of cigarette smoke almost blinded me. Making my way into the ring where quite a large crowd were shouting their support. "Come on Jack, come on JR" came the shouts. I noticed that the ring ropes looked extremely slack as I sat down on my stool. There was a bucket, towel, sponge and a bottle of water as Paddy and Taff scrambled up behind me. "Where's my bloody gum shield" I hissed as Paddy scuttled off to ask the fat man. He returned empty handed minutes later. What did he say demanded Taff angrily ?. " He said what the f.....g hell do you think this is the Albert Hall" At this time I looked over to take stock of my opponent but there was another man instead of the little guy with a lisp whom I had picked sitting on his stool

opposite me grinning like a Cheshire Cat. An unseen hand seemed to grip my stomach. This fellow was a full blown Middleweight at least broken nose from ear to ear and it seemed like I was in for one hell of a pasting. "Hey Miles'y, I've been bloody seen off here, have you seen the bloke I'm fighting"? I hissed as I beckoned the fat man over. "Where is the little bloke I picked outside" I asked him as he came over to ask how to announce me. "He is indisposed" He answered flatly. "What do you mean indisposed" I demanded. "You are fighting a substitute" The fat man replied. I looked across at my opponent again "But he's a bloody Middleweight at least" I said angrily. "So what, you're not chickening out are you"? Sneered the fat man as he stormed away. The yelling crowd almost drowned the fat man's voice as he began his announcement and for the first time I noticed the pall of smoke hanging like a mist under the overhead lights which stung my eyes. I also noticed that the fat man had removed his jacket and was acting as Referee. He beckoned me over into the centre of the ring to where my opponent was waiting and still grinning. I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach as I realised that I had been taken for a mug and there was no way I could get out of it. My opponent was at least 6 inches taller than I was and much more muscular. I desperately tried to remember the instructions my old Chief PTI would have given me as we both touched gloves and returned to our corners. I vaguely heard my companions bawling instructions and realised that the only thing I had going for me was the fact that I was extremely fit and a very unorthodox southpaw.

As the bell clanged I noticed that my opponent had adopted an orthodox stance and I decided to throw caution to the winds. "Hit him in the slats JR" bawled Miles'y from my corner. Instinctively I did just that and unleashed a left hand which caught my opponent deep under his rib cage. For a brief moment he seemed to stop and my heart almost missed a beat. The crowd went mad realising that my opponent may have been hurt but he merely grunted and came forward menacingly towards me. Desperately trying to remember to either 'get on my bike' or 'clinch' or alternatively 'jab with my right hand and move away' to wait for an opportunity to throw my left again. I decided to try and do both and began to jab with my right hand almost at will but with very little effect as my opponent wanted a 'brawl' The first round seemed to go on for an eternity and it was only the intervention of the crowd and my companions with catcalls of "Time" and "How Long Each Round Ref" to the fat man who eventually, to my relief, sounded the bell for the end of the first round. I gratefully slumped onto my stool as Miles'y sloshed water into my face and Paddy began to waft me with a towel whilst Taff sponged me down. Taff's protests that the round had lasted for at least five minutes were met by scowls from the fat man. Looking across at my opponent I noticed that he was puffing a little more than I was and this seemed to give me a little more confidence.

Any such new found confidence I may have had soon disappeared as the bell sounded for the second round, as my opponent charged across to the centre of the ring and I was forced to clinch and hold on and I felt a searing pain in my mouth as his head caught me violently under the chin at the same time our heads cracked together and I felt blood running down into my eyes. The crowd almost erupted in fury and began to boo and yell "Foul, come on fight fair" together with a few more choice expletives. I felt the salty taste of blood well up in my mouth as the fat Referee waved me to my corner to wash out whilst my opponent retired to a neutral corner still grinning. The crowd continued booing as Miles'y held up the bucket for me to spit out the bloody contents of my mouth which were closely inspected by Taff and Paddy, the latter who could'nt resist saying. "The bloody dirty sod, did you see that"? They both exclaimed angrily. I felt my temper rising and forgot about the pain for a few moments as Miles'y stuffed a few sheets of toilet paper into my mouth as the fat

man came over and grinned "Have you had enough yet Jack" ? He enquired sarcastically. "No he bloody well has'nt" Bawled a defiant Miles'y as he feverishly swabbed the flow of blood from my head and eyes. My opponent just grinned as I kept trying to brush the blood from my head and eye. My white vest was now soaked in blood and for a moment I had that awful feeling in my guts that this bloke was going to perhaps murder me so I decided to go for broke.

Anger filled me as the bell sounded for the second round as I sought out my opponent and for the next minute or so simply threw everything I had, right hand jabs and follow in behind it, throw the left often. A barrage of right hand jabs into his face followed by a fusillade of lefts to the body and ribs momentarily halted his advance. He drew me into yet another clinch and again I felt a sharp pain above my right eye as his head again gouged into my face. It was my opponent's turn now to begin thundering blows into my face and I had no alternative other than to 'Get on my Bike' and move around the ring with him still stalking me menacingly. After another eternity and the crowd booing madly, the bell sounded and I again gratefully slumped onto my stool. "Bloody Hell JR, look at your frigging eye" Bawled Paddy. "Shut up you prat" Hissed Miles'y as he began to feverishly sponge my face and replace the blood soaked tissue in my mouth. "Go on JR!" yelled Taff "You can still do him" "You shut up as well" Hissed Miles'y passing me the bottle to swig and rinse out my mouth. The pain was almost unbearable and the crowd were almost beside themselves with anger at the tactics of my opponent and the Referee who refused to intervene despite calls of "Fix, Fake and Fraud" Their booing was incessant as the bell rang for the third and last round as we came together and began to hammer each other unmercifully. My opponent's sheer strength and power of punch were simply too much for me and I was forced to 'get on my bike' again, relying on the odd jab and left hand. There is no doubt at all that my unorthodox 'southpaw' style confused my more experienced opponent and I began to realise that I might actually survive the final round which must have lasted forever. The catcalls and booing of the crowd eventually forced the fat man to end the bout and the bell could not come soon enough for me. The end of the fight saw us both slugging it out for dear life in the centre of the ring as the final bell sounded amid loud cheers from the crowd who demanded that the fat man and Referee hand over my fiver immediately, which he did almost reluctantly to yet more cheers. I was an absolute mess. My forehead was cut and my right eye too. My mouth was full of blood and the smoke stung my eyes but I had survived, against all the odds I had survived.

My delighted oppos almost carried me back to my corner and even a "Christ, you look a bloody mess" from Miles'y failed to dampen my spirits. We returned to the dressing room to get cleaned up and changed. My vest was a complete write off and was quickly ditched in the nearby waste bin. A glance in a nearby mirror almost gave me a fit as I ruefully examined the state of my bloodied face. My right eye had a cut above it and was swollen and the blood soaked tissue when removed revealed a cut on the inside of my upper lip which fortunately had stopped bleeding. A quick wash in a basin nearby and I almost was as good as new according to Paddy and Taff. I had just finished changing when the fat man came in. "Well done Jack" He said patting me on the back. "Anytime you fancy another go just give me the nod" He grinned. "You must be bloody joking" I managed to mumble through rapidly swelling lips. "Come on lads, let's go and get slaughtered" Suggested Miles'y cheerfully. I scowled at him "I've jutht been bloody thlaughtered " If any of you bugggerth have got any more bright ideaths then keep them to yourthelves" I managed to lisp. A second or two of silence as my three companions looked at me and burst out laughing. "From here on you will be known as the other man with the lithp" Chortled Miles'y.

The remainder of the night proved extremely enjoyable for Miles'y, Paddy and Taff as they managed to wine and dine in comparative luxury on the proceeds of my generosity whilst I found it quite painful at times to force glasses of neat Rum through a straw as my swollen and tortured lips rebelled and was the only way I could drink anyway. As for the intended Fish and Chips they proved simply too much and were shared by the others. I never forgot that night and even today when I hear someone talking with a speech impediment I shudder when I think of that night on Southsea Common and what a cocky bugger I was. The pain finally subsided and I put the events down to experience. As for Miles'y, Taff and Paddy, we enjoyed a few more good runs ashore whilst we were at Siskin but none was quite as painful as that night on Southsea Common when I met the other man with the lisp.

**IF THERE EVER WAS A MORAL TO THIS TALE I'M AFRAID I
CAN'T THINK OF IT..... MAYBE STUPIDITY**