

DOING THE RIGHT THING?

By Ian Brown

The lashing rain was verging into sleet. The wind drove it into the boys' faces as they set off. Because of the weather, all rugby games had been cancelled and a compulsory run had been prescribed as the afternoon's exercise. Nobody was happy about it, including the Prefects. The place *did* have the reputation of being the toughest boarding school in the north of England, but that didn't mean that the boys enjoyed slogging along the country roads and through the muddy fields, drenched and frozen.

Brian Thomas and the other Prefects had set off after the pack. Up until the age of around fifteen, Thomas had liked running. But now, with his weight up to 170 pounds, he had grown to dread it. As a member of the school's rugby team, however, he was determined to set an example.

Climbing over a turnstile, he shouted encouragement to a group just ahead of him.

"Keep going, you'll feel great after a hot bath." The bedraggled boys responded with a little spurt. They liked and respected Thomas.

He managed a smile as he caught up with them. At just that moment, something caught his attention. To his right, behind a clump of bushes, he could see someone in running shorts trying to hide. Thomas immediately recognized the person as being Oliver Bailey, the resident trumpet player in the House Jazz Band. Thomas hesitated for a second and then kept on running.

Later, it turned out that quite a few people had skipped the run. After some discussion, the Prefects decided to tell all those who might be guilty to congregate in the library after supper.

It was during the Head Prefect's admonishments that Thomas noticed the absence of Oliver Bailey. He was sure he must be mistaken. He checked again to see if Bailey was sitting in some dark corner. It came as a shock when he realized that 'Olly', as he was called in the band, was definitely not present.

After the meeting had ended, and the culprits had been ordered to do the same run before breakfast the next morning, Thomas told the other Prefects what had happened concerning Bailey. To his surprise, nobody seemed too upset. Thomas couldn't deny that the situation made him feel uncomfortable. It was unusual to discipline a senior boy. However, the fact remained that Bailey had abused the system's honor code by not owning up.

It was about 7 p.m. when Thomas sent a junior boy to summon Bailey to number 1 study. The expression on Bailey's face as he entered the study was far from contrite. From the outset, he was hostile and flatly denied that he had skipped the run.

"Oh come on, Olly, I'd like to forget this whole thing, but the fact is that I saw you. I saw you quite clearly behind those bushes."

"Well, you must have made a mistake. How could you tell it was me?" Bailey protested, raising his voice.

"I saw you with my own two eyes! I know what you look like. It was you all right. Why don't you admit it?"

Suddenly Bailey's eyes blazed and he said:

"In any case, what right do you have to interrogate me like this? Why should I stand here and take this?"

“Take what? So far, I think I’ve been pretty decent. I think it’s the other way around. Why should I take the way *you’re* behaving. First, you don’t have the guts to come to the library. Then you lie to me. Then you raise your voice and ...”

“What makes you think you’re right, Thomas? Do you *always* think you’re fucking right?”

Thomas felt stunned. This was not going according to plan. Bailey was behaving completely contrary to what would normally be expected under the circumstances.

“No, I don’t always think I’m f-ing right, but I *know* I’m right this time. I also know that as a Prefect, I have the right to question you. For God’s sake, man, why must you lie?” As he said that, it flashed across his mind for an instant that he sounded just like his father.

“I’m not lying. How do you know I didn’t go round the run? In any case, why should I *have to* go round the bloody run? What right do you have to make me?”

Thomas winced as he felt the legacy of a childhood obeying what was supposed to be right, fair and true. Without any warning, he suddenly slammed his coffee cup down violently.

“Listen Bailey, I don’t know why you’re doing this, but you’re not going to get away with it. You have forced me to punish you. I’m going to have to beat you, and let me tell you, it’s more on account of your lying than anything else. I’m really disappointed in you. Go to 6 dormitory and wait for me.”

Some minutes later, Brian Thomas beat Bailey four times on the buttocks, as hard as he could, with his cane. Afterwards, Oliver Bailey straightened up and stared at Thomas cold-eyed. He took a step towards Thomas, and for a moment, it looked as if he was going to strike out, but then he turned towards the door and left without a word.

Thomas stood in the dormitory drained of all emotion. He slowly descended the tairs. His feet felt heavy. Something was welling up inside him but he didn’t know what. Suddenly, at the bottom of the stairs, he could feel an aching arise from deep within him. He sat down on a bench, head in hands, and began to cry. He remembered how it had felt when *he* had been beaten. It was true - it hadn’t felt right. It hadn’t felt fair.

For some, it seemed odd when Bailey joined the Forces a few years later, and Thomas, whose father happened to be an ex-Army officer, became a part of the late-sixties underground.