

Gravesend – A Rude Awakening

I left Whitby as a 16 year old and arrived at "Gravesend sea school" about 5.30pm, on a cold November evening. The night was pitch black, and I stumbled into the entrance of the school...

"Get in line for your tea lad," someone shouted.

I didn't know who had given the command, I was very nervous, and not wishing to "stand out," I quickly found my place in the line for the evening meal. I was very hungry and remember being desperate not to look stupid.

I stood in line for a couple of minutes. An instructor was walking down the line of waiting boys.

"Who's boxing tonight then," he shouted.

"I'll have a go" the boy a couple behind me shouted cheerfully.

"Ok Mullvaney, and who are you gonna box?"

"HIM," he said pointing to me. I was terrified and hoped the instructor would think he was joking, but, he came up to me and said "you're new son, you don't have to box tonight, but if you want we'll get you kitted up"

Fearing immediately that if I didn't fight, I'd be called a coward, I meekly nodded my head and mumbled, "OK, I'll box."

I estimate that I had been inside the school for all of ten minutes, and already I was gripped with terror. I was not a happy camper!

"What's yer name mate" the challenger asked, "Kevin," I mumbled.

"Mullvaney's my name" (I can't remember his first name)"listen," he whispered "don't worry mate, tonight's medal night and we'll put on a good show. You don't hurt me, I won't hurt you, and we're up for a medal! Just put on a good show." His Cockney accent and attitude sounded very confident and reassuring, and I tried desperately to convince myself that everything would be all right

My meal felt very heavy in my stomach as I imagined my pending demise!

About twenty minutes later, I was taken to the rear of the hall where I was given a pair of shorts and a vest. Every few Mullvaney would come to me and repeat, "Don't forget, don't hurt me and I won't hurt you."

Somewhat reassured, it was only a few minutes later that we were led to the ringside, to fight the next bout.

The entire school was in the hall, screaming for their favourites and the noise seemed deafening to me.

Just before we were called up to the ring I turned to Mullvaney, and almost crying with fear said, "So we'll just put on a good show then?"

He looked at me with a sneer on his face and said sarcastically, "I'm gonna bloody well kill yer!"

I don't recall ever having felt fear like I experienced in the next few seconds, but my legs were like jelly as I climbed into the ring. All I can remember was the P.E. instructor saying "just box son, you'll be ok."

The bell sounded. I looked across the ring to Mullvaney's corner. He had his head down, and was charging across the ring, murder on his mind! I had to move quickly. As he charged, I sidestepped and hit him as hard as I could, catching him with a beautifully timed, perfect shot to the side of his head. He went to the canvas like a shot deer, fortunately staying there until the instructors took him away.

I visited Mullvaney the following morning. He was recovering and still in bed. Blood covered his pillow. Fortunately he fully recovered, but he never spoke to me again. I didn't like boxing but went on to fight 3 more times during my "education". I retired undefeated, but what a rude introduction to Gravesend Sea School.