

Tropical news

BRINGING YOU THE LATEST NEWS
FROM OUR FAMILY AND FRIENDS
AROUND THE WORLD

DECEMBER 2007

*We wish you all a very Happy Christmas
and a peaceful New Year*

Editorial Ramblings



I find it very sad to be writing about the failure of mankind to prevent war in my *Reflections* page and, at the other end of our magazine, be wishing you a peaceful New Year. I also find myself in the strange position of being very much against war - yet very proud and supportive of my dear son, Paul, who is a Royal Marines Commando serving in Afghanistan. What contrasts. I suppose that the only way we can reconcile these extremes is to consider

that not all of mankind is involved in killing each other at the same time and some of those who do fight the battles do so because they believe they are doing something to help the world become a more peaceful place. Certainly this is the case with Paul who thought long and hard before signing up with the Royal Marines. Of course, being realistic, the ideal situation

where everyone sits round the table and decides things peacefully will never happen because some of the leaders of organisations and countries won't let it happen because they *want* a fight (see *Reflections*). Wouldn't it be a great achievement if the whole of mankind could live happily and peacefully together. Then everyone would have a peaceful New Year. Sadly, I fear that that time will never come as long as mankind continues to turn their back on their faith in God or deliberately misinterprets their religious teachings to suit their own evil ends - as well as electing evil war-mongering leaders to run their countries. I'm not into making New Year resolutions, but wouldn't it be fantastic if mankind could resolve all conflicts during the next year.

We thank you so much for all the e-mails of support that you've sent us during the Battle for Musa Qaleh in Afghanistan. I might add, that the letters have come from both Christian and Muslim friends and from many countries. Religious differences do not cause war - only evil leaders do that. The every day people that one meets all the time, do not want war. They all want to just get on with their lives in peace with their neighbours. We have sent all the letters to Julie, as we know that you would be including her in your prayers too. It seems that the battle started some time before it appeared on the news. We didn't get to hear of the battle until early in the second week of December, but, according to the RM website, the Royal Marines were engaged in combat early in November. Knowing that Paul is going to be home safely for R&R at Christmas means that Grace and I will be having a very peaceful Christmas too.



10 Troop, Delta Company 40 Commando Royal Marines on patrol in the Afghanistan town of Sangin. This, to me, is such a sad photograph as it shows how even little children are dragged into war. A war that they they don't understand, where their lives and the lives of their families are at risk. A total failure of mankind. It is a very poignant picture to me, as I have one, very dear son, Paul who could be one of the armed men on patrol, and another very dear son, John, who, in another time could be one of the little children standing watching the armed men walk past. (*Photograph from the RM website*)

Front Cover photograph: Sunset across Subic Bay, Philippines, from Baloy Long Beach - near where we live.

Your prayers are needed...

for David and Ruth:

We have received the following note from David:
All well here, I'm very well at the moment because of the Chemo
Please continue to pray.

for Leopoldo (Grace's father):

Leopoldo is continuing to make progress and we would value your prayers that this will continue.

for Joseph and his friend:

Joseph is still suffering from depression due to his various problems. We ask for your continued prayer support.

for Maribel:

Maribel is still working out her family problems and would value your prayers.

for Gerry and Sylvia:

These lovely folks need your prayers for Gerry's health in particular and to give Sylvia strength to look after him..

and thanks.....

for Paul (Alan's son):

We thank God that Paul is on leave in the UK for Christmas. I recently received the following e-mail from him.

Hello Dad,

Now, why have you been worrying so much??? I am now back home for a couple of weeks for a bit of R&R. It has been pretty hectic since I arrived in Helmand but nothing that we cannot handle. In the 80 odd days we have been there we have only had 15 days where we haven't been in some kind of contact. But our training and professionalism has put us in good stead.

Honestly Dad, I am fine and will continue to be until my tour finishes next April.

I must thank you and all your very good friends for sending such warming messages to yourself and Jules (Julie) as she also worries about me.

I was in the battle for Musa Qala last week and it went very well for us and I believe so too for the rest of the ISAF forces. We just need to dig in now and wait for them to counter!!!

Anyway Dad all my love to you and Grace and John at this special time of year; sending you seasons Greetings from Jules, Emily and me, your son.

I hope you feel a little more relieved now and please, you don't need to be concerned, I'm a Green beret and steely eyed dealer of death.....!!!!

Love to you, Dad

Paul, Jules and Emily xxxx

Your Letters



We are pleased to introduce this new page to our newsletter and hope that ALL of you will contribute a few words. All letters published will be done so anonymously. Letters may be edited a little, although nothing will be done to change the meaning or context of anything submitted for publication.

The stamp (left) depicts the Hundred Islands National Park which is in Pangasinan, Grace's home province, and near to where used to we live, in Alaminos.

Hi again,

Your newsletter was great, as ever - however it has sent me into a whirl of dislike for the entire human race as I was prompted to think again about war and how absolutely insane it is...and what a travesty and failure of mankind that it is still being practised. We elect governments who have people in them - leaders we're taught to believe - who can't discuss and debate and arrange things without firing bombs at each other.

In school, children are expected to operate without violence and are punished if they resort to such behaviour, yet in society it seems it's OK? I don't care what the issue - the first tenant of any religion is - THOU SHALL NOT KILL. It's a total evil and wickedness to condone or have any part in war...so how can we progress while people still perpetrate such actions?

Most times we just ignore it, but that's probably wrong too, and we say *Oh Well, I can't change anything* -- and elect in the same war mongering creeps.

Oh dear, what a world.

Apart from all that, it's still sparking along though! Today is very clear and beautiful so I'll bury war again and just pray man sees the light etc.

Much love and thanks again for all your thoughts.

Hi Alan & Grace,

Had and read your November news. Quite a lot of it this time and very professionally laid out, I must say. I wish I could get to grips with a program to do that. But I suppose not having much call to use it, would not be much use in buying one?

Anyway, sorry about the delay in answering, but the last few days I have not been feeling up to the mark. Can't say that I'm ill. Just not got the hwyl (Welsh word for Get up and Go) to do much.

Congratulations to you and Grace on your 7th wedding anniversary. The time sure does fly.

I was very pleased to hear that you have had news of Paul in Afghanistan and that it sounds as if he is safe. We can only wish the best for him and the lads out there with him. It really annoys me to think that those boys are out there in Afghanistan and Iraq, in all that danger, and this government is keeping them short financially and equipment wise. They are, as far as I am concerned, purposely putting their lives into further danger.

The photo of JP is a cracker! If that's not a mischievous look on his face I do not know what is. He seems to be really growing now.

Remembrance Day is a very emotional day for me. To see the poor old boys that were prepared to give their lives for this country during WW1 and WW2 and the other conflicts. When I see them laying wreaths on the Cenotaph in Whitehall and their march past it on the TV, and to see how they are now being treated - like paupers - in this country and again by this infuriating Labour government. When you see all the so called officials; Prime Minister, MP's and their followers, that come out of that building by the Cenotaph to lay wreaths. It is then that I wish something would happen one day to make them see the reality of what the day means to the ordinary people of this country. Not just another official disturbance to their Sunday morning - as most of them see it.

Hope you are all keeping well out there and free from all the bugs and upsets. I'm not too bad myself.

Best wishes to all and hope you all have a lovely Christmas and New Year.

(Ed: My apologies to the writer of this very interesting letter for the serious cuts that have been made. However, it was great to read your thoughts on several matters I haven't printed here. Keep writing; we love to hear from you)

Hi Alan and Family,

What a relief to know that your son is OK - we wish him a great time with his family. We were quite worried- just thinking about the environment Paul is in, let alone being in the middle of the conflict zone. Someone told me the other day that we need to trust the powerful spirit above - and leave some worry to Him, because we can't control everything we do in life. So with a huge hope, we trust that Paul will be protected and saved from danger.

All the best to all of you, Guys. Have a great Xmas ahead, sharing the joy and sadness - whatever life brings along. It is never enough to attempt to be a good person - there is always something we can improve to be better and better. The good is the only strategy to feel well and find friends.

God's blessings for the New Year - and let's hope that Paul and all the other young people on this mission will be able to go back home for good in 2008. The same applies to our Australians wherever they are now fighting for democracy and order.

I guess we need to make the New Year good - we need to keep trying to make this world better - everyone of us can contribute to the spirit of goodness and personal integrity to be part of the whole community and the world - just making a difference whenever and wherever we can - because no matter where we are we should spread the good to oppose the evil and ignorance. We need to believe in being able to be good and to spread goodness.

Take care,

Happy Birthday to Grace



19 December 2007

We thank you for your prayers

Many thanks for your ongoing sizeable mailings!
I hear tonight of one British soldier lost in the Musa Qaleh battle, which is, I presume, where Paul is right now. Our prayers continue.
Bless you all,

He will definitely be in our prayers.
Love

Hi Alan,
I'll certainly keep Paul in my prayers and please keep Jason (*ed: in Iraq*) in yours also. We have not heard from him in almost 2 weeks.

Alan,
I saw the BBC and wondered about your son. We will bear him up in prayer,
Anyway, all the best. Keep us updated. Love to all

Dear Alan
May God protect your son and all the sons that are in war. Lots of prayers Paul's way
Warm regards

Hi kuya Alan,
Sorry to hear this I know that you are worrying so much for your son. All we can do is to keep on praying. He will be ok.

hi Alan,
yes i will pray for your son....take care always...
God is good...your son will be safe....

Hi Alan,
Although i did not meet your son but knowing you and what a kind person you are; the good news brought tears to my eyes. I am happy that you finally received comforting news about your son especially in these blessed times of holidays.
I hope you will have a great peaceful Christmas and a happy new year.

I completely empathise with you - my brother is also there!

And, after the battle, knowing Paul is safe:

Excellent news Alan. I'm sure you all could not have had a better Christmas present than news like that?

Thank GOD,
Good news, surely we all were praying for him to come back home safe.

Alan, that is wonderful news. This will be one of your best Christmas season ever, knowing that your son is on his way home to England.

That's wonderful news, Alan. What better could anyone want at this time of the year. The only down thing about it is, such a short leave.
Hope you're all OK and all have a lovely Christmas and New Year. Will be thinking of you.

Thanks - good to hear. He'll have learnt a lot about politics, the world etc. as a result. may it stand him in good stead for his future life.

Good News Alan
I'm very pleased that Paul is OK. I was reminded about the situation you are in when I saw an excellent TV programme - not sure of the name, but it was taken from a great book called something like Nella Last's Diary - the story of an ordinary woman doing extraordinary things during the dark days of WW2. See if you can get it - it's great!

Excellent news - thank you
and God bless you all

We pass on our support to you through this worrying time and we trust that Paul soon passes through his duty in Afghanistan. It's great news for you that the first tour is finished and you won't have to worry so much over Christmas.

Hi Alan
So good to hear this news. Continued prayers are needed for all those being sent back and may peace be restored to this whole area very soon.

Hey Alan!
I'm happy to know that Paul is safe! Are you going to the UK to see him? How is Grace and John? Is there anything else I can do to support besides just prayer alone? Talk to you soon Alan. A lot of love to you Grace and John

Hi Alan
So good to hear this news. Continued prayers are needed for all those being sent back and may peace be restored to this whole area very soon.

It's good news that your son is safe. Hope that this Christmas is filled with peace, love and happiness for you and yours'.
Have a good season.



Djibouti

French Somaliland now Djibouti, gained its independence from the French in 1977. An extremely poor country, it grows crops of the mind altering drug *Khatt*, which most males chew as they sit around with no work to do. *Khatt* sellers (*photograph at bottom of page*) line the streets with their booths while the women make craft products to sell by the roadside (*below*) in order to scratch a living for their families. Many families live in make-shift shanty structures as shown overleaf.





Our thanks to Sawsan, who sent these photographs taken by her husband, Bilal Al-Omari during his recent 6 month stay in Djibouti (horn of Africa). Regular readers will remember that Sawsan and Bilal also contributed to the newsletter with some delightful photographs of Sawsan's home country, Bosnia, in the August 2007 edition.





The Royal Marines - Paul's photographs



Paul has been kind enough to send us these photographs taken in Afghanistan. No doubt Brown (UK Prime Minister, *photograph left*) is standing on a box (soapbox?) as Paul is 6'5". Note the helicopter watching over him.

It should be he that is facing the bullets; not our young men putting their lives at risk for his government's incompetence.

As a letter from one of our readers said: *Hi Alan, I am so pleased to know that Paul is safe for the time being. If only this stupid war were over. There should be no need to send the cream of our young men to put their lives on the line every day. That's what the 2 Great Wars were to have put an end to.*

Overleaf, top, Paul is far right (kneeling).
Overleaf, bottom. Paul is first from left.





Royal Marines secure the way to Musa Qaleh

The following information has been taken from the UK Government's Royal Marines website at URL:

http://www.royalmarines.mod.uk/units-and-deployments/3-commando-brigade/40-commando-royal-marines/news/news-article.php?article_id=119 (dated 22 November 2007) and:

http://www.royalmarines.mod.uk/units-and-deployments/3-commando-brigade/40-commando-royal-marines/news/news-article.php?article_id=120 (dated 27 November 2007)

Under Command of 40 Commando Royal Marines, British troops in Helmand Province, southern Afghanistan have pushed up into the Taliban's heartland. The Royal Marines as the UK's amphibious force have been using their maneuverability to overcome difficult enemy terrain so that soldiers from Right Flank Scots Guards, in Warrior tracked armoured vehicles, have been able to position themselves in the area of Musa Qaleh to carry out a series of patrols against the Taliban.

The operation has been planned and executed by the Commanding Officer of 40 Commando Royal Marines and Battle Group (North) Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Birrell RM, and has made good progress.

Lt Col Stuart Birrell RM said:

"This operation gave us the opportunity to demonstrate early within our deployment that the Royal Marines can, and will operate anywhere in Northern Helmand. It has been tough to get the vehicles in position.

"Without 40 Commando, the move north would have been impossible. Our vehicles, the Vikings, are designed for the difficult terrain we encountered and our expertise is second to none. This is what we trained for and I am really pleased with the way the Marines conducted themselves throughout."

Moving just before first light the Royal Marines from 40 Commando pushed North in their Vikings (the Royal Marines own armoured All Terrain Vehicle). Initially securing the western bank of the wadi the



Commandos took advantage of some old Soviet-era trench systems on a piece of high ground overlooking the entire area.

The journey to position near Musa Qaleh was fraught with danger and it wasn't long before the Commandos and soldiers with them came under enemy fire. This was quickly suppressed by the Royal Marines as they continued to clear the way for the convoy of vehicles to move forward.

As the enemy mortar fire died away Major Dan Cheeseman RM, Officer Commanding Bravo Coy was able to push across the wadi with Vikings from the Armoured Support Group. Utilising the vehicles unique ability to cross all terrains and the steepest of gradients, Major Cheeseman began to reconnoitre a number of crossing points on the eastern bank.

With a couple of fording points dismissed as too difficult for the less agile vehicles to cross in the dark, the race was on to secure a bridgehead before last light. With less than an hour until dusk Major Dan Cheeseman was finally able to pinpoint a suitable crossing point.

As engineers from the attached 69 Squadron Queen's Gurkha Engineers started clearing a number of minor obstacles, Lt. Col. Birrell gave the order to proceed with the crossing and a company of Warrior armoured vehicles that formed the vanguard of the patrol



thundered across and established a secure area on the far bank.

Once in position in the area of Musa Qaleh, soldiers from the Scots Guards and their supporting elements have been carrying out reconnaissance patrols deliberately designed to show the residents, Taliban or otherwise, that ISAF has not forgotten about the town. With the patrol safely in place, the Commandos were finally able to execute their planned extraction, returning to their compound in Sangin.

Lt Col Stuart Birrell RM, Commanding Officer 40 Commando Royal Marines said:

“We seek to play to our strengths whilst taking advantage of enemy weaknesses. This operation demonstrated the flexibility and determination that exists across the Helmand Task Force to tackle the Taleban in places where they least expect us to be. This was a fully integrated operation involving a wide range of land and air assets, both UK and coalition, and has been a significant blow to enemy morale in the area.”

A spokesman for Task Force Helmand, Lt Col Richard

Eaton said:

“This operation is part of a longer term strategy to keep the Taliban in Musa Qala unsettled. We have frustrated them in what they consider to be their heartland by manoeuvring into area, and by disrupting their resupply and other operations. 40 Commando Royal Marines have been pivotal in the operation and thanks to them it has been very successful.”



Royal Marines of Delta Company 40 Commando Royal Marines catching up with their 'scran' on ANP Hill, conditions are pretty basic with the Marines sleeping near their firing positions and mortar pits. Near Zad, Helmand, Southern Afghanistan



Royal Marines of Delta Company 40 Commando Royal Marines on patrol at dawn near the town of Now Zad

On 10 December 2007, the following update to the Battle for Musa Qaleh was published on the RM website at URL:

http://www.royalmarines.mod.uk/units-and-deployments/3-commando-brigade/40-commando-royal-marines/news/news-article.php?article_id=129

The Commandos from 40 Commando Royal Marines, based in Somerset, are part of a large NATO/Afghan operation to take the Taleban stronghold, the last major urban centre controlled by the insurgents. The Taunton based Royal Marines are heavily involved in the ongoing operation as the Afghan National Army (ANA) supported by ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) troops push to drive the Taleban out.

The operation has been ongoing since early November when the Commandos stormed across the Musa Qala wadi, a previously uncrossed obstacle, paving the way for ISAF forces to start harassing the enemy to the south of Musa Qala.

During the past week the Royal Marines, alongside their Army colleagues have pushed further into enemy territory towards Musa Qala in order to draw the enemy fighters away from the town before a helicopter insertion of ISAF troops struck to the North of the town (7 Dec). The operation to gain control of Musa Qala is expected to continue for the next few days.

Lt Col Stuart Birrell Royal Marines, the Commanding Officer of 40 Commando Royal Marines said:

“The operation to take Musa Qala is a key step in reducing the fighting ability of the Taleban. By removing their last urban stronghold we will be able to further restrict their ability to operate within Northern Helmand. This is a fully integrated operation involving a wide range of land and air assets including UK, coalition and Afghan Security Forces. The success of this operation will be a real blow to the Taleban and will drastically destabilize their forces.”

(All Photographs from the RM website)

*John Paul Alan. The explorer.
Off on his travels and adventures.*



Alan's Reflections

Alan's Reflections

I've just finished watching a TV programme on the *Discovery Channel* that reinforced what one of our correspondents wrote in a letter published in this edition about the **failure of mankind**. The programme was entitled *Future Weapons 2*. I was interested to see it from the technical point of view, but I found it seriously disturbing - which is why I'm burning the midnight oil writing this immediately afterwards.

What was so disturbing about this programme wasn't the weapons per sé - although they were bad enough - but the attitude of the presenter (and some of those being interviewed) who glamorised the whole issue of what after all is the business of KILLING PEOPLE!

One (female) design specialist, working on surface to surface missiles for Lockheed Martin, said her work was **exciting!** I wonder how exciting she'd find it if she (or her son) was on the receiving end of one of her missiles!

The presenter was a former US Navy SEAL who said he'd served with them for 10 years. Grace took one look at him and said she certainly wouldn't trust him! Undoubtedly he was a prime candidate for being one of those sad (mentally disturbed) people who actually *enjoy* a fight. And there are plenty of those around. Otherwise, why would people deliberately put themselves at risk by taking part in so called sports such as boxing and other contact sports (or being a football hooligan)?

I remember turning on the TV, over a decade ago (in the UK), and scanning the channels on my satellite receiver, to suddenly find myself watching one man smash another man's face into the floor of a boxing ring - repeatedly! At first, I just froze in horror. It wasn't fun to watch and I very quickly turned to another channel - but it left an indelible image on my mind. I read, a few days afterwards that I'd seen a (then) new *sport* called **fighting!** The only rules in fighting are: No eye gouging, no biting and no blows to the groin. Quite a lot of men have been killed in this activity that has been banned in several countries. But the question remains: WHY? Why do people take part in this activity? Why do other people want to watch this barbarity as a means of entertainment? Do people actually enjoy watching other people being seriously hurt (frequent occurrence) or killed? It seems that we haven't made any progress in civilisation since the days of the Roman gladiatorial contests of 2000 years ago. If the Romans in their Colosseum were still feeding Christians to the lions and gladiators were still fighting to the death, there would still be people willing to take part

(excluding those being fed to the lions!) - and even more people wanting to watch them DIE!

In modern day Spain we still see bull fighting, where thousands of spectators turn out hoping to see the matador gored by the bulls horns - and seem to relish the poor bullock being agonisingly tortured before meeting his end. These have the same mentality of people who would be sitting in the Roman Colosseum all those years ago - or in the arena watching the *fighting* in these times.

It is a sad reflection to think that people haven't changed at all since time began - we've just become more effective at killing and maiming each other.

Our correspondent also said: *the first tenant of any religion is - THOU SHALL NOT KILL.*

How strange it is then, that so many conflicts have been, and are being fought in the name of religion or for ostensibly religious reasons or causes.

Unfortunately, the war-mongering leaders who run this planet are tarred with the same brush as the aforementioned US Navy SEAL - except that they just shout their orders from the safety of the sidelines rather than fire (and stop) the bullets themselves. In order to get the support they need from *the people*, they talk about the enemy being evil whereas they, of course, have God on their side. They brainwash the people - especially the young boys (who actually do fire and stop the bullets) to join the military forces in the belief that they are serving their country and their God. What is really needed is that all those boys who are willing to be shot at, refuse to join the military in the first place (even if conscripted) - and refuse flatly (as many did during the Vietnam conflict) to pick up arms at all. If that happened, there would be no military forces anywhere, and no more war - therefore, no more weapons. The war mongering leaders can't fight a war without the young men and women who fire (and stop) the bullets. If no one fires, there will be no more war - and no more of the death and destruction that mankind has wrought on himself since time began. Of course, I realise that evil leaders (Hitler, for example) need to be got rid of - but there are ways of doing this without sacrificing the lives of millions of people in doing so.

Sadly we've now got to the point where people are actually boasting about how effectively they can destroy the lives of other people. Of course, much of this is disguised in the language of *tech-speak* using words such as target, incident, enemy, hit, taken-out, opposition, and other such words that protect us from the images that can be conjured up by words such as kill, death, destruction, murder, maim, mutilate, carnage, dead, bodies. After all, we're only *human* - aren't we?

Alan



Sad to say, but this young Filipino family is reduced to destroying their county's natural beauty, by harvesting shells to sell to tourists, in order to eke a living

I'm not the only one!

to criticise the demise of the British education system (see *Reflections* last month and other previous editions). The following is an article written by Melanie Phillips and published in the *Daily Mail* on 10 December 2007. From her website at URL: <http://www.melaniephillips.com/articles-new/?p=554>

Education? No, it's Balls!

Daily Mail, 10 December 2007

The Children's Secretary, Ed Balls, is coming over as a cross between Marshal Foch and an apparatchik of Stalin's Central Committee.

On TV yesterday, he batted away any suggestion that the Government's education policy had been a disaster. On the contrary, he boasted, standards were rising all the time.

He thus called irresistibly to mind both the French Army commander Marshal Foch's remark in World War I: 'My centre is giving way, my right is in retreat; situation excellent. I shall attack' — and a functionary in Stalin's Russia announcing the latest Ten Year Plan.

Indeed, he told us a ten-year plan for education was exactly what we are now about to have. Comrades, applaud!

Education, we are now told, is Gordon Brown's passion. Haven't we heard something like that before?

The result of his predecessor putting it at the top of his agenda is that, according to a study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, British teenagers have now fallen out of the top ten in international league tables for reading, mathematics and science.

British pupils were ranked 17th in reading compared to seventh in 2000. In maths, they fell from eighth to 24th - below the international average - and in science they slumped from fourth to 14th.

Even with a health warning about a study that does not necessarily compare like with like, these results are appalling. They suggest an education system in free fall, spelling long-term disaster for the country.

Yet Mr Balls tried to dismiss them by throwing sand in our eyes. The results were misleading, he claimed, because new countries had been added to the tables. So what? That just means even more countries are better

schooled than we are.

According to Mr Balls, whose ability to portray black as white is straight out of Orwell's Ministry of Truth, education standards are rising but they are not yet world class. Frankly, many are now not even Third World class.

The examination system has been manipulated to support the pretence that government policy is working, with dumbed down exams and courses producing ever more incredible improvements in GCSE and A-level results.

Mr Balls sneers at the annual eruption of incredulity over these absurd results as 'decrying the hard work of teachers and pupils'. Not a bit of it.

Academics from both Durham and Lancaster universities have concluded that such rises are due to grade inflation brought about by a lowering of exam standards.

In person, Mr Balls comes across like a less than stellar product of his own education system: semi-inarticulate, with faux proletarian-diction, and parroting recycled propaganda instead of facts.

Did I say 'education'? How very last century. Tellingly, 'education' is the one word that no longer appears in the title of this Cabinet minister or the Department for Children, Schools and Families that he leads.

Doubtless, this explains why Mr Balls has extolled the Spice Girls as role models for the nation's young women - along with Margaret Thatcher (whom he mentioned twice in yesterday's interview, and who would therefore appear to owe her unlikely place in Mr Balls's hall of heroines to cynical political calculation).

One can think of many epithets for the Spice Girls - vacuous, tacky and past it come to mind - but what appears to make them qualify as role models in the mind of the Children's Secretary is simply that they embody commercial success.

Mr Balls is thus a most fitting uneducation minister: the

living, breathing embodiment of our ethos of degraded aspiration and cultural philistinism that lies at the core of our education calamity.

For the noble premise of a liberal education, that children's sights should be raised up to the very best that humankind has ever produced, has been replaced by the doctrine that children should be taught what is 'relevant' to their lives.

The whole idea that schools should open up the world for them is thus negated, and they remain trapped instead within their own limited horizons.

The result is a meltdown in education that has been apparent for the past two decades. The Royal Literacy Fund has described the writing skills of British undergraduates as a public 'catastrophe'.

Good A-level grades are being awarded for illiterate and substandard work. Fewer than half of English pupils have mastered the three Rs in their GCSEs. Four in ten 11 year-olds leave primary school having failed to reach the required level in reading, writing and numeracy.

According to a recent major study, children are making virtually no progress in mathematics in the first three years of secondary education and some even go backwards.

Ofsted reports that half of secondary schools in England fail to give pupils a good education, and the numbers of 'failing' schools have risen by one-fifth. Even the Government's much vaunted specialist schools have failed to raise standards significantly.

In response, Mr Balls proposes to raise the school leaving age to 18, thus trapping young people in two further years of schooling for yet more qualifications giving an illusion of achievement.

Pupils will be able to pass the new BTec diploma in English, equivalent to a GCSE graded A* to G, without reading a book, poem or play.

Mr Balls says primary school pupils will now be made to learn a foreign language. But what is the point when foreign language teaching has been all but destroyed by a souped-up Berlitz approach which teaches children tourist phrases but no systematic grasp of grammar?

Indeed, children are no longer taught to master their own language. In 2007 — astoundingly — Britain

is still unable to teach its primary school children to read.

Studies by Durham and Cambridge universities have concluded that the Government's literacy strategy has resulted in no rise in literacy levels, leaving reading skills no better than they were during the 1950s.

Now Mr Balls has set up an inquiry into primary school education under Sir Jim Rose. Sir Jim is indeed excellent. But we've been here before.

Back in 1992, Sir Jim co-wrote the seminal 'three wise men' report on primary education. This starkly laid out the catastrophe in primary schools and launched a programme of education reform - which has been steadily jettisoned ever since.

The National Curriculum was hijacked by the very education establishment it was designed to bring to heel. The National Literacy strategy was wrecked by educationists who refused to teach structured phonetics.

School SAT tests were subverted by the manipulation of standards to enable more children to pass them, in addition to outright cheating by a number of schools.

As the system went down, action was taken against the remaining bastions of excellence which by their existence illuminated the failure. So grammar schools had to go; university admissions were rigged against pupils from good schools; A-level was steadily undermined and is about to be finished off altogether.

Now with Mr Balls's Children's Plan, school tests are to be destroyed by stealth. Pupils will no longer take the tests at the same time, but when they have 'reached the level which makes sense for them' so that individual children can be tracked.

But these tests were never intended to evaluate the children. Their whole purpose was to test the teachers, whose inadequacies had brought the whole system to its knees.

Mr Balls claims he will 'clear away the clutter' in primary schools. The fear must be that he will now clear away what remains of education itself.

Lower school leaving age proposed

The following article is courtesy of the BBC website (published on 15 December 2007) at URL: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7145858.stm

The head of the UK's biggest education authority says some children should have the option to leave the classroom at 14 to learn a trade.

Tony Howell, from Birmingham City Council, says such a scheme would help to plug the skills gap.

“Some 14-year-olds will probably be better off in some kind of apprenticeship,” he said.

But the National Union of Teachers said children who leave school early may not be taking the best course of action.

Mr Howell said that some children of 14 were the “kinds of learners” who were better suited to apprenticeships.

“That’s how they will get success,” he said.

“And we need to cater for the range of people and the range of jobs we all have in society.”

Earnings potential

John Bangs from the National Union of Teachers said that early school leavers would not earn as much as those who have stayed on and gained qualifications.

“As you look at the passage of a youngster as they grow up and go on having got a qualification, the amount of money those youngsters earn, or all youngsters earn, is much higher if you do have a qualification than if you’ve just simply left school very early and gone on to do some very specific training.”

The Department for Education and Skills confirmed plans in January to raise the school leaving age in England to 18.

This means that, by 2013, all pupils will have to stay in education or training until the end of the school year in which they turn 17. By 2015, this leaving age will be raised to the 18th birthday.

This will not mean that pupils have to stay in the classroom or continue with academic lessons, but they will have to continue to receive training.

At last, someone with some common sense!

Photograph overleaf: Our friend Lucy and her family. Lucy was one of the close friends that Alan made soon after coming to the Philippines in 1997, when he and Lucy worked together in Manila. Lucy was also kind enough to present us with the wonderful gift of our wedding rings when we got married in November 2000.



